

READING
the GOSPELS
WISELY

A Narrative and Theological Introduction

JONATHAN T. PENNINGTON


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2012 by Jonathan T. Pennington

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pennington, Jonathan T.

Reading the Gospels wisely : a narrative and theological introduction / Jonathan T. Pennington.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3937-9 (pbk.)

1. Bible. N.T. Gospels—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Bible. N.T. Gospels—Theology.

I. Title.

BS2555.52.P455 2012

226'.06—dc23

2012011956

Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



To Mark Gigniliat and Keith Johnson,
in gratitude for many years of life-giving friendship

Contents

Foreword by Richard Bauckham ix

Preface xi

Part 1 Clearing Ground, Digging Deep, and Laying a Good Foundation

1. What Are the Gospels? Defining “Gospel” 3
2. What Are the Gospels? Understanding the “Gospel” Genre 18
3. Why Do We Need the Gospels? (Or Why Saint Paul Is Not Enough) 36
4. The Joy and Angst of Having Four Gospels 50
5. Texts and History: The Testimony of the Fourfold Witness 74
6. Reading Holy Scripture Well: Three Avenues 108
7. Reading Holy Scripture Well: Intent, Meaning, and Posture 122
8. Foundations for Reading the Gospels Well 143

Part 2 Building the House through Wise Reading

9. Reading the Gospels as Stories: The “Whatever Strikes Me” (WSM) Hermeneutic versus Narrative Analysis 169
10. Reading the Gospels as Stories: Circles of Contextual Meaning 183

Part 3 Living in the Gospels House

11. Summing It All Up: Applying and Teaching the Gospels 213
12. The Gospels as the Archway of the Canon 229

Scripture Index 259

Author Index 265

Foreword

So much has been written about the Gospels that no one could ever read more than a fraction of it. But anyone who begins to read what scholars have been writing about the Gospels soon discovers that there are many different sorts of important questions one can ask about the Gospels and that most of them have received many different answers. It can be daunting and confusing.

Not so long ago nearly all Gospels scholars would have said, very confidently, that the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus. Now, however, many would say that is precisely what they are, though with the qualification that they are the sort of biography people wrote at that time. But does that make them reliable history, or are they more like legend or myth or novels or propaganda? A lot of the scholarly literature is engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus, attempting to get back behind the Gospels to what the historical Jesus was really like before the early Christians started the process of interpretation that gave us the Gospels. Refined tools of historical method have been developed for studying the Gospels in this way, but the tools and their use are debatable. Furthermore, the results of the quest are so varied and contradictory as to throw the feasibility of the whole enterprise into doubt.

Does any of this matter for Christian faith or for Christian theology? Those questions too have been debated. How are faith and history related? Some would say that the quest for the historical Jesus is necessary for faith and discipleship today; others would say that it is irrelevant or even dangerous. Should Christian faith and theology buy into the Enlightenment notion of “history,” as the quest has generally done, or question it? While much of Gospels scholarship has been concerned with historical questions, theological questions also loom large. Should we not, after all, be reading the Gospels primarily as Scripture, with the whole canon of Scripture as their principal context of meaning? This is how the church has usually read them, and there are those who now advocate strongly that we should return to the traditional ecclesial

practices of reading the Gospels from which modern historical preoccupations have distracted us. And then there is hermeneutics, the science of interpreting texts, which has its own large literature, some of it philosophical and very technical. This in turn interacts with other questions about the Gospels and generates its own kinds of enquiries. Daunting and confusing?

But here is a book about these questions that is neither daunting nor confusing. Jonathan Pennington is familiar with all the questions, has read widely, and has thought hard about them. His concern is with helping Christians read the Gospels in a way that is faithful to the sort of texts they are. With this concern to guide him (and his readers) he is able to distill from the scholarly discussions what matters most for this task. He does so with admirable clarity and coherence, and, notably, he achieves clarity and coherence without being reductionist. He does not cast aside most of the Gospel texts in a minimalist search for the historical Jesus, but nor does he leave history aside in favor of canon or theology alone. He invites us to read the four Gospels as history and theology—each as a narrative whole in its own right, as the climax of the great scriptural metanarrative, and as the keystone in the archway of the whole canon of Scripture. What is perhaps most distinctive in his approach is his concern for Christian virtue and discipleship. The sort of literature the Gospels are is not sufficiently defined by saying that they are historical and theological. They are also literature that aims to make a difference to the lives of their readers. They are virtue-forming. They call their readers to following Jesus in a way that is transformative.

I have been impressed by Jonathan Pennington's work since he worked on a PhD under my supervision at St. Andrews. I am very happy to commend this book. Reading the Gospels wisely is one of the most important things Christians can do, and I hope this book will help many to do just that.

Richard Bauckham
Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Preface

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

Matthew 7:24–27

The Gospel of Matthew has always stood at the head of the New Testament canon, and its famous Sermon on the Mount has always been considered paradigmatic for understanding both Jesus's teachings and earliest Christianity. It is fitting for us then to listen closely to the climactic conclusion to the sermon in the words above. In this final, parabolic image, Jesus describes his teaching as a fork in the road that divides his hearers into two distinct groups: the wise and the foolish. There is no middle ground.

The wise are distinguished from the foolish in that they not only *hear* Jesus's teachings but also then *act upon them*; that is, they order their lives according to his ways and wisdom. The content of Jesus's teaching matters, but here at the end of his sermon the emphasis is on responsive hearing. Wise people must *hear correctly* what Jesus teaches, but they must also *respond* to this grace with faith and faithful living.

We would be wise to take our cues from Jesus's teaching here as we approach the fascinating topic of how to read the Gospels. Taking direction

both from Jesus's call to respond and his figurative parable, it is appropriate that we pursue our reading of the Gospels with both the goal of being wise and the image of building one's house with wisdom.

Thus this book, which contains theoretical discussion of several topics as well as practical instruction on methodology, is ultimately about how to be *a wise hearer and follower*. This is what it means to approach the Gospels as Holy Scripture and with wisdom. We are not looking for simply an arsenal of good techniques, be they premodern, modern, or postmodern. Nor are we seeking mere knowledge (*scientia*) for knowledge's sake. As Kierkegaard wryly quips in his *Provocations*, "He who can sit with ten open commentaries—well, he is probably writing the eleventh, but he deals with the Scriptures *contra naturam*."¹ Not as wryly, but even more foundationally, Saint Augustine makes clear what our goal in reading must be: "So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."² Less than this kind of responsive hearing cannot truly be granted the status of "understanding."

Continuing with the metaphor of wise building, this book is a proposed blueprint for building a wise Gospel-reading house and thereby life. We may think of the fourfold Gospels as a four-roomed house. This book will *not* explore each of those rooms in depth, neither their furnishings nor their color palette choices; other introductory Gospels textbooks, in addition to the scores of commentaries and homilies on each individual Gospel account, do this well. Instead, this book seeks to do something more foundational and structural.

In part 1 ("Clearing Ground, Digging Deep, and Laying a Good Foundation"), I provide an expansive foundation that marks out our place of building and forms clear architectural lines. These foundational chapters discuss the nature and literary genre of the Gospels (chaps. 1–2), our need for the Gospels (chap. 3), and the perceived problem of having four different accounts rather than one (chap. 4). I then address groundwork issues underneath the Gospel rooms: the question of the type of historical witness the Gospels provide (chap. 5) and hermeneutical matters concerning what it means to read any part of the Bible as Holy Scripture (chaps. 6–7). Part 1 concludes with a survey of the ground that has been covered and draws implications for what it means to read the Gospels wisely (chap. 8).

Part 2 ("Building the House through Wise Reading") shifts the discussion from the theoretical to the practical, from the foundation to the construction. Chapters 9–10 lay out a narrative analysis method for how to read the Gospels

1. *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 1:210.

2. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 1.36.

as stories. This method consists of a narrative model for interpreting individual stories, followed by guidance on reading a Gospel story within ever-widening circles of context.

The final part of the book, part 3 (“Living in the Gospels House”), consists of two subparts. Chapter 11 drives home the point of the preceding ten chapters by discussing how to apply and teach the Gospels. We may think of this chapter as the drywalling and painting of our Gospels house so that we might begin to move in. Chapter 12, then, is finishing the house and unlocking the front door. It is the open-house invitation to enter into the richness of the fourfold Gospels. Or to use another, related metaphor, chapter 12 argues that the Gospels should be understood as the keystone of the archway into all of Holy Scripture. The Gospels are the entrance into the house of understanding who God is in Christ and thereby the entryway into being a wise hearer and doer of Jesus’s words.

This book is written for any reader who is interested in learning how to engage the Gospels more deeply and how to apply them for personal study and/or preaching or teaching. It is meant to be a companion to, not a replacement for, traditional introductory texts,³ which typically focus on providing an overview and explanation of the contents, themes, and background of each of the four Gospels. The book now in your hands offers both a deeper opening to introductory issues in the Gospels and a specific narrative, pedagogical, and homiletical model.

It remains only for me to acknowledge some of the many people who have helped me in the production of this book. First, I thank my wife and family, who have felt with me the burden of “getting the book done.” I am also grateful for the countless students upon whom I have tested most of this material and who have always provided helpful feedback. At a deeper level, several students and friends have read many of the chapters and commented on them at a reading group in our home. These contributors include Chris Borah, Nate Collins, Hans Cook, Jordan Goings, Jay Hand, Jesse Morgan, Michael Spalione, Justin Tubbs, and Brett Vaden. For the production of the indexes and other editorial work, I am thankful to Jess Andrews. Thanks also to Chris Borah for producing several of the graphics. I am indebted to other professorial friends far and near who have taken the time to read all or portions of the manuscript in various forms, including Tom Schreiner, Richard Bauckham, Rob Plummer, Mark Strauss, C. Stephen Evans, Matt Crawford, Mickey Klink, Darian Lockett, Jeff Dryden, and Robert Yarbrough. Finally, the comments and kind guidance of my editor at Baker Academic, James Ernest (and all of Baker’s editorial team), have been invaluable.

3. For example, see the excellent book by Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

I dedicate this book to two dear friends, Dr. Mark Gignilliat and Dr. Keith Johnson; both are very important to me, though they've never met each other. Both are scholars and churchmen who have provided constant encouragement and iron-sharpening for me over the years as I have developed the ideas of this book. Their impact on me intellectually and spiritually is great and greatly appreciated.

For further resources related to this book, please visit www.readingwisely.com.

Clearing Ground, Digging Deep, and Laying a Good Foundation

What Are the Gospels?

Defining “Gospel”

Brainstorming “Gospel”

If we were to engage in a little brainstorming about the word “gospel,” many different ideas would emerge. Many readers would immediately think of the “Romans Road” or the “Four Spiritual Laws” or some other basic, evangelical Protestant explanation of the “gospel,” that is, “the basic message of salvation.” For others an obvious answer would be the four stories about Jesus found in the Bible. The lovers of English philology among us, or at least some fans of 1970s Broadway musicals, may offer that our English word “gospel” comes from the older “God-spell,” meaning “good” (OE *gód*) plus “tidings” (OE *spel*).¹ Those with a knowledge of Greek may proffer the etymological analysis of *eu* plus *angelion*, “good news.” Some may even go further by noting that around the time of Jesus this Greek word was often used to refer to the announcement of “good tidings,” especially that a new emperor had been born or ascended to the throne.² Opening our Bibles to the beginning of the New Testament would

1. This is the etymology as presented in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s.v. “gospel.” Interestingly, the editors note that a common misinterpretation is that this word came instead from a compound of *gōd* (meaning “God”) and *spel* (in the sense of “discourse” or “story”). As they observe, “the mistake was very natural, as the resulting sense was much more obviously appropriate than that of ‘good tidings’ for a word which was chiefly known as the name of a sacred book or of a portion of the liturgy.”

2. A regularly cited example of this is an inscription from around 9 BC regarding the birth of the emperor Augustus, which “marked for the world the beginning of good tidings through

remind us that this word “gospel” is used in yet another way: in conjunction with the accompanying phrase “The Gospel according to X” as the heading or title for the first four books of the New Testament. That is, it used to be so; many Bibles and commentaries today no longer use “The Gospel according to” in their titles,³ despite the fact that from the earliest days of the church, the connection of the Gospels with a known person was very important.⁴ Such thoughts and possibly others would arise from our brainstorming reflections on “gospel.”

“Gospel” in the Apostolic Witness

Moving beyond these reflections we can examine specifically the ways in which the noun “gospel” (*euangelion*) and its verbal cognate “gospelize” (*euangelizomai*) appear in the New Testament. When we consider the apostolic witness *outside* the Gospels, we find that both forms of this word occur with regularity as an overall description of the apostles’ message, or kerygma (proclamation). For example, the noun is found sixty-six times in Paul’s letters and the verbal form (often translated “to preach” or “to evangelize”) another twenty-one times. Significantly, Paul uses “the gospel of God” as the way to describe his ministry at the opening of his missionary letter to the Romans. He unpacks

his coming.” Cited in David Wenham and Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament*, vol. 1, *A Guide to the Gospels and Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 48.

3. It is lamentable that Bible readers would begin to think of these four stories as merely “Matthew” or “John” without their ancient and important qualifying superscripts, “The Gospel according to . . .” Modern translations of the Bible are mixed in how they treat the titles for the Gospels. Virtually all older English translations had the full “The Gospel according to . . .” This form has survived in several translations, including the NKJV (1979), the NASB (1977), the NEB (1976), and the NRSV (1989), while others have abbreviated the titles simply as “Mark,” “John,” etc., as in the HCSB (2004), the Living Bible (1971), and the NIV (1973). When the fuller phrase is retained, it is often minimized by its smaller font size and its appearance only at the very beginning of the book but not in the abbreviation of the book throughout (e.g., ESV). An earlier stage of this truncation was the loss of “Saint” before the evangelists’ names; thus “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” became “The Gospel according to Matthew” and now just “Matthew.” In the history of printing Bibles the only conceivable stage left of this moniker degradation would be “A Story about Jesus,” followed by “Another Story about Jesus,” and so on. My unscientific survey of modern commentaries on the Gospels reveals this truncating trend even more dramatically. Older commentaries, even if thoroughly higher critical in approach, retained the full title. See, for instance, Ezra Gould’s 1896 ICC volume, titled, “A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark.” “Saint” is dropped in Lane’s 1974 NICNT and “according to” becomes more generically “of” in France’s 2002 NIGTC. But France and Lane appear even old-fashioned compared to most post-1980 commentaries, which, regardless of confessional stance, use only the evangelist’s name. Thus, Wessel’s 1984 EBC, Guelich’s 1989 WBC, Marcus’s 2000 Anchor, and A. Y. Collins’s 2007 Hermeneia all use simply “Mark.”

4. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). See also Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

what he means by this gospel *from* or *about* God in the following verses. It is the good news that God promised beforehand in the Holy Scriptures (1:2), namely, the coming of Jesus, descended in the flesh from David (1:3) but shown to be so much more, God's very Son, as demonstrated by the power of the Spirit and Jesus's resurrection from the dead (1:4). This is "good news" because it is grace, and consequently it is a call to all the nations to come and believe in this message of hope (1:5–6). In Paul's opening words to the Galatian churches, he reproves them for potentially abandoning this same good news message about Jesus Christ. This is foolish, he says, because the "different gospel" they are turning to is really no good news at all; it is a hopeless attempt at accepting Jesus plus Torah obedience (Gal. 1:6–7; cf. 2:16). In another early letter, Paul likewise repeatedly refers to the "gospel of God" or "gospel of Christ" or just "our gospel" to describe the message that he had proclaimed and taught among the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:2, 4, 8, 9; 3:2). This wording is a particular favorite of Paul's, but the same usage can also be found elsewhere, for example, in Hebrews (4:6) and 1 Peter (1:12, 25; 4:17).

We will not take the time to examine all the occurrences of this important word in the New Testament, which are readily available in other studies.⁵ Instead, we may simply observe that consistently throughout the New Testament Epistles the "gospel" refers to *the oral proclamation about Jesus the Christ* (meaning the anointed Davidic King)—who he was; what he accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection; the promise of his future return to establish God's reign; and the concomitant call to repent and have faith.⁶ This is not a message of moralism or a call to greater religious obedience but rather is a proclamation of God's grace and the invitation to hope. This is why it is rightly called "good news."

There is another biblical reason it is called good news, and we will explore this below. But before we move on to the question of how the apostles' use of the word relates to the evangelists' usage, we should note one other important connotation inherent in Paul's choice to call his message "gospel." As mentioned earlier, scholars have observed that the noun and verb forms of *euangelion/euangelizomai* are certainly not unique to the Bible or Christian witness but instead have currency in the Greco-Roman world surrounding nascent Christianity. Namely, "good news" was used in a propagandistic way to announce the birth or ascension of an emperor and as part of the Roman imperial cult or worship of emperors.⁷ Thus, it has political and religious

5. For example, see the articles for *euangelizō* and *euangelion* in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider's *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

6. Another obvious "gospel" defining text is 1 Cor. 15:1–11, which also particularly emphasizes the connection of this message with the story of the Old Testament via its refrain of "according to the Scriptures."

7. Cf. William Horbury, "'Gospel' in Herodian Judaea," in *The Written Gospel*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Donald Hagner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7–30; Graham

implications, ones particularly irksome to both Jews and Christians in the first century who refused to honor the Caesars as deity and who certainly did not consider their rise to be “good news.” Undoubtedly Paul and the other early Christian missionaries were well aware that calling their message “gospel” or “good news” was not only something related to Judaism and Christianity but also simultaneously a political, worldview, and eschatological claim. It was the claim used by the savvy Jewish leaders to get Jesus crucified by their Roman oppressors (see John 19:12–15; cf. 18:33–37); it was also a claim that at times would land Jesus’s followers in trouble (e.g., under the Neronian and Domitianic persecutions). To preach that Jesus is the true King over all kings, the only true Son of God, and therefore the only one worthy of worship is not merely a personal conviction of individual piety but is necessarily a public, political, and polemical proclamation.

From “Oral Gospel” to “Written Gospel”

We have seen that the New Testament’s “gospel” is a highly charged and theologically significant expression used by the apostles to summarize their proclaimed message about Jesus. It is a kerygma or proclamation. We still use the word in this way today, such as when we speaking of “preaching the gospel,” though usually with a sense narrower than the apostles. That is, at least in much of Protestantism “the gospel” has come to refer to the doctrinal information about the justification possible through faith in Christ. Especially in evangelical circles, “the gospel” has come to refer specifically to the forgiveness of sins available through Jesus’s death and resurrection. Although certainly not wrong, this meaning is notably incomplete and narrower than Paul’s own usage, which much more comprehensively refers to Jesus’s entire life, death, life after death, and future return; it is the whole proclaimed message, not just the particular (and partially polemical) issue of “justification by faith,” which Paul has in mind when he speaks of “the gospel.”⁸

We use “gospel” to refer not only to the *oral* proclamation of the good news but also to the *written* documents about the life, death, and resurrection of

Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 25–35. See also J. P. Dickson, “Gospel as New: *euangel-* from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 212–30.

8. The discussion of how the NT defines the “gospel” is current and at times rather heated. For a good, generally balanced exploration of “gospel” in the NT, see Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). My understanding and definition of the gospel are not identical to McKnight’s, but there is much overlap. See also Darrel Bock, *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2010), in which he describes forgiveness of sins and justification as the hub, but not the whole of, the gospel wheel. We will return to this issue later.

Jesus. This is not a modern invention; as early as the first quarter of the second century AD, the noun *euangelion* was being used to refer to our written accounts, our “Gospels.”⁹ This raises an interesting question: If the apostles and the New Testament letters use the word to refer to their oral proclamation only, how and when did it come to be a literary designation? The answer is not an easy one and not without a variety of opinions. It is entangled in another, related debate about the publication and manuscript transmission of the Gospels. I can offer a brief explanation of these important questions and suggest a probable answer.

Our inquiry must start with what is likely our first Greek Gospel, the Gospel according to Mark.¹⁰ Mark begins his account with words that are strikingly recognizable to those familiar with Paul’s proclamation: “The beginning of the Gospel of/about Jesus Christ” (*Archē tou euangeliou Iēsou Christou*). It is very reasonable to assume that Mark’s choice to open his account with this weighty word “Gospel” stems in large part from its current and well-known usage in earliest Christianity.¹¹

A couple of comments can be made on Mark’s Greek phrase. First, the ambiguity of the genitive “of/about Jesus Christ” (*Iēsou Christou*) is best left as just that. Commentators disagree on whether this is a subjective or objective genitive. The rich flexibility of the genitive here likely accommodates both the sense of a Gospel *about* Jesus Christ (so a heading over the book) and the gospel *from* or *by* Jesus Christ, that is, the message of the good news about God’s kingdom that has come from and through Jesus the Christ, or even that preached by him. The comments of A. Y. Collins are well put: The genitive here is ambiguous because those readers familiar with Paul and the other apostles would understand the phrase to mean “the good news *about* Jesus Christ.” But “in light of the following portrait of Jesus as proclaimer [of this gospel in 1:14–15], the phrase also takes on the meaning ‘the good news announced *by* Jesus Christ.’”¹²

9. “Gospel” was used to refer to a gospel book, as in Justin’s *First Apology* 66.3 (ca. AD 150–55), which uses the plural *euangelia* to refer to Gospel books; even earlier the *Didache* uses *to euangelion* (8:2; 11:3; 15:3–4) to refer to a book that is probably Matthew. Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 14.

10. I will not enter into the many arguments for or against various source critical views nor the history of this debate, all of which is accessible in many standard textbooks. I consciously use “first Greek Gospel” in reference to Mark to suggest the possibility of an earlier Aramaic document comparable to the Gospel of Matthew. Even though our Greek Matthew is clearly not a translation from Aramaic, the uniform testimony of the early church to the originality of a Semitic-language Matthew, even if there was some confusion of the Aramaic and Greek versions, cannot be easily discounted. See also James R. Edwards, *The Hebrew Gospel and the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

11. This has been suggested by many scholars including C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936); and Ralph P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).

12. A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 16.

Second, we may also note the unexpected anarthrousness (lack of the Greek article) of *archē* at the beginning of the phrase. Apollonius's rule would suggest that the head noun "beginning" (*archē*) and the modifying genitive noun "of the Gospel" (*tou euangeliou*) should both be either articular or anarthrous. However, the lack of the article with *archē* here likely signals that this word and phrase serve as a heading or title as can be found elsewhere.¹³

Stemming from this observation, convincing arguments can be made that Mark's opening phrase does not just refer to the first few events of the story, nor is it a mere comment that the Christian proclamation began here. Rather, this opening phrase serves as a title for the whole message of salvation he is presenting, namely, his *narrative* as a "kerygmatic biography."¹⁴ The rest of Mark's uses, as we will see, still have the primary (and older) sense of the orally proclaimed message, but 1:1 serves as an *incipit*, or the beginning of a book, designating this narrative as an *euangelion*. Loveday Alexander, reflecting on the connection of the oral and the written senses of "gospel/Gospel" observes that "from the earliest recorded stages of church tradition, then, the written gospels had a dynamic, two-sided interface with oral performance. They were seen as the deposit of oral teaching and preaching; and they were used as the basis for ongoing oral instruction in the early church."¹⁵

Thus, we can see that our word "gospel" is already being stretched in a new but not unreasonable way to refer not just to the oral proclamation about Jesus (as in Paul) but now also to the written accounts of the same. Because Paul's gospel is the same as the evangelists'—all are apostolic witness—it is quite natural that "gospel" came to mean both the oral proclamation and the written witness to it, even as it does in our current parlance. Indeed, one striking passage in both Mark and Matthew (Mark 14:9; Matt. 26:13) makes this equation quite specific. As Denis Farkasfalvy notes, in this account of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, the evangelists suppose that the proclamation of the "good news" (the gospel as salvific message) goes hand in hand with the narrative accounts. Jesus here guarantees or even commands that any presentation of the gospel message include (at least) this narrative account.¹⁶

We may push this argument a bit further into the question of the titles or superscriptions for the Gospels. As I have mentioned, the title form "The Gospel according to . . ." will prove to be an important aspect of how we understand their witness to history. Related to the fact that in the early second-century the

13. For example, Hos. 1:2; Prov. 1:1; Eccles. 1:1; Cant. 1:1; Matt. 1:1; Rev. 1:1. Robert Guelich, *Mark*, vol. 1, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989), xix.

14. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 90–91.

15. Loveday Alexander, "What Is a Gospel?" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, ed. Stephen Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

16. Denis Farkasfalvy, "The Apostolic Gospels in the Early Church: The Concept of Canon and the Formation of the Four-Gospel Canon," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 117–18.

Gospels were already called *euangelia*, we can note that also from very early on the Gospels were being titled as codices (books as opposed to scrolls) in this way: “The Gospel according to . . .” (*euangelion kata Matthaion, euangelion kata Markon*, etc.).¹⁷ We know that the New Testament documents were organized and transmitted in fairly standard manuscript packets. That is, we find that the Gospels (or more accurately, the fourfold Gospel)¹⁸ were regularly bound and copied together, with the consistent titling of “The Gospel according to . . .”¹⁹ This was often followed by other sections, also grouped and titled: the book of Acts (*praxeis*), the General Epistles (*epistolai katholikai*), the Epistles of Paul (*epistolai Paulou*), and the Revelation of John (*apokalypsis Iōannou*).²⁰ This indicates that at least by the time of this kind of editorial activity, the word “gospel” had come to refer to a literary genre and not only its older and more generic meaning of “a proclamation of good news.”²¹

How early this occurred we cannot know for certain. Martin Hengel argues most strongly for their originality. That is, Hengel believes that Mark’s designation of his work as a “Gospel” became well known and widely accepted.²²

17. Much work has been done recently on this important topic. Two of the most helpful testimonies to it are Hengel, *Four Gospels*, and David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

18. Irenaeus (ca. 180), defending against a harmonizing of the Gospels (as in Tatian) or a reduction of them to one preferred Gospel (as with Marcion), wrote in favor of the *euangelion tetramorphon* (“the fourfold Gospel” or “the Gospel in four forms”) in his *Adv. Haer.* 3.2.8. This eventually results in the widespread Latin reference to the Gospel book as the Tetraevangelium. Hengel notes that in the early church there was great emphasis on the one Gospel about Jesus Christ, and thus the evangelists’ narrative accounts were considered a witness to the “Gospel,” coming down or given through the witness of the named evangelists. We have not “Mark’s Gospel” alongside “Matthew’s Gospel” but the one Gospel that is about Jesus Christ, communicated in the version of Mark, Matthew, etc. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 48–49.

19. From papyri, Old Latin, Coptic versions, and also from Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, we know that at least from the first half of the third century the title form “the Gospel according to X” was widely used. Cf. Stanton, *Gospel for a New People*, 14. But manuscript evidence points toward an even earlier time. The individual Gospel accounts also certainly circulated widely as individual codices, as manuscript discoveries (especially Egyptian papyri) show.

20. Trobisch, *First Edition*, 38–41, details the use of the titles in the manuscript tradition and what they meant. A good example of this is the important Codex Alexandrinus, which is representative of earlier exemplars. This manuscript begins the NT section with a table of contents titled *hē kainē diathēkē* followed by the section’s titles. See fig. 5 in Trobisch, *First Edition*, 42. For details on which manuscripts contain which Gospel titles and whether they occur as *inscriptiones* or *subscriptiones*, see 126n142.

21. Trobisch, *First Edition*, 38, states as much: the *euangelion* “designates the literary genre” as do the other titles.

22. Graham Stanton alternatively argues that not Mark but Matthew originated this genre meaning of the word. He acknowledges that while Mark’s development of Paul’s use of *euangelion* did pave the way for its later reference to the story of Jesus as *euangelion*, Mark did not take that step himself; this was first done by Matthew. Leaning especially on Matthew’s reference to “this gospel of the kingdom” in 24:14 (cf. 26:13), Stanton follows Kingsbury in suggesting

Then, when publishing their subsequent and related works, Matthew, Luke, and John also appeared with the same now-accepted literary designation. The other evangelists did not necessarily title their works “The Gospel according to [me].” In fact, they would have presumably been content with other descriptions such as “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ” (Matt. 1:1) or an “orderly narrative” (*akribēs diēgēsis* from Luke 1:1–2). But because of Mark’s influence, these later Gospels were always published and disseminated with these superscriptions.²³ In my opinion the strongest argument for the originality of these titles (at the publication level) is that ancient books were rarely anonymous, and the apostolic connection for these narrative accounts was especially important for their use in the church.²⁴ Another weighty argument for their originality from Hengel is that suddenly in the second century these titles appear consistently and are referred to as authoritative. It is difficult to imagine this happening if the titles were not original.²⁵ Indeed, ancient books were often identified with a variety of titles, but this is not the case for the Gospels; they are consistently referred to together as “The Gospel according to . . .” This is most easily explained if they were on the autographs or at least very earliest copies made.

Regardless of whether one is convinced by these arguments, it is clear that our word “gospel” very early underwent a transition or, better, expansion to include both an oral and written sense of “good news” related to Jesus Christ. But we have still not examined the four Gospels themselves to see how they define and nuance the word. Pride of canonical place leads us to listen attentively to the evangelists’ treatment of “gospel.” We will find that there is great consistency in their explanation of “gospel,” yet it is not exactly what many of us would expect or offer in our earlier brainstorming activity.

“Gospel” in Mark

After his opening salvo, Mark uses the noun *euangelion* six more times,²⁶ but the most important occurrences are found in 1:14 and 15: “Now after John

that the evangelist assumes that his readers will know what “this gospel” is on the basis of their acquaintance with his written document. Stanton, *Gospel for a New People*, 13–17. He reiterates this view in his later book *Jesus and Gospel*, 12. I do not find this argument convincing because the “this” in Matthew’s expression is referring not to his Gospel narrative but to Jesus’s proclamation in 4:23 and 9:35. See below on Matthew’s usage of “gospel.”

23. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 63, 80.

24. *Ibid.*, 52, 54, 81.

25. *Ibid.*, 54. I surmise that Trobisch’s interpretation might be a little different, namely, that the consistent use of the titles is evidence of a very early and widespread “canonical edition” of the NT that appeared and quickly rose to prominence.

26. The seven occurrences of *euangelion* in Mark are 1:1, 14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; and 14:9. The textually inferior longer ending of Mark (versified as 16:9–17) also contains the word in

was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’” (1:14–15).

After his opening words in 1:1, in a span of a mere twelve verses Mark introduces us to two men. One is a wild-man prophet who is preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. The other is the Spirit-imbued Son of God about whom John is preaching and who undergoes his own wilderness trial before bursting onto the public scene in Galilee. This second man, Jesus, has as his message the announcement that God’s promised reign or kingship²⁷ has drawn near and consequently the call to repent and believe in this message. Most important for our inquiry, this message is explicitly called “the gospel of God” or simply “the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15). This is the key defining point for Mark’s explanation of what “gospel” means. The other four uses of “gospel” in the rest of his narrative are nondescript, assuming the definition and explanation given here. What is this definition? It is that the “gospel” is the message about the promised return of God’s reign, now appearing through the person of Jesus from Nazareth.²⁸

“Gospel” in Matthew

When we go back a book, to the first Gospel in the New Testament canon, we find confirmation and further explanation of this same use of “gospel.” Although Matthew does not use the word as many times as Mark (five times²⁹ compared to seven), this concept proves to be very important for his explanation of Jesus’s ministry. This is evidenced in the greater specificity with which he uses the word and the key places where he employs it. Aside from

16:15. Whether it is original or not, it adds nothing to our understanding of *euangelion*, being derivative from 13:10 and 14:9.

27. We must note the variety of ways in which *basileia* can and should be understood in biblical Greek. Most of the time its primary sense is not “kingdom” as a location per se, but instead it refers to the act of reigning or the rule of a king. This is not to say that the locative sense is unfound or unfounded either. “Kingship” is perhaps the best translation in most cases, as it straddles the semantic domains of both “kingdom” and “reign.” For fuller discussion of the meaning of this word, especially in reference to God’s *basileia* and Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven,” see my *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 253–330.

28. It is worth noting the parallel between the genitive phrases in 1:1 and 1:14. First, we read “the gospel of Jesus Christ” and then “the gospel of God.” *EDNT* argues that in contrast to its usage in the OT and Jewish and secular Greek literature (where it usually means “news of victory”), *euangelion* in the NT “denotes the news that concerns God or comes from God.” It is a technical term for the “message about Christ” that is widely understood as “joyful tidings,” though sometimes this means judgment, not only grace (e.g. Rom. 2:16; Rev. 14:6f.) (*EDNT*, 2:70).

29. Matthew’s uses of the noun *euangelion* are in 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; and 26:13. Matthew also uses the verb form, *euangelizomai*, when quoting LXX Isa. 61:1 in Matt. 11:5.

the verbal form (*euangelizomai*, “to ‘gospelize’ or proclaim the good news”) used in Matthew 11:5, quoting Isaiah 61:1, Matthew always uses the noun *euangelion* in combination with a specifying word or phrase. In three of his four uses, this explanatory addition is “of the kingdom” (*tēs basileias*), and in the final occurrence (26:13) he refers back to this same phrase with the anaphoric shorthand, “this gospel” (*to euangelion touto*).³⁰ In fact, it is the initial phrase *to euangelion tēs basileias* in 4:23 that most clearly explains Matthew’s understanding of the “gospel.” He repeats this phrase in 9:35 for a very important purpose; its later use in 24:14 is referring back to these earlier uses, indicated by the demonstrative *touto* (“this gospel of the kingdom”), followed then finally by the shorthand version in 26:13.

The key, then, is to examine these first two instances of *euangelion* in Matthew to discover his point. It is a well-crafted and theologically significant emphasis. Not only does the phrase “the gospel of the kingdom” strike the ear as new and intriguing; a closer look at its recurrence reveals that Matthew carefully crafts its usage so that his readers will grasp its weighty implications. Its occurrences in 4:23 and 9:35 are part of the repetition of the paragraphs in 4:23–25 and 9:35–38. This striking and lengthy repetition of words clearly indicates that chapters 5–9 are to be read as a unit; these repeated paragraphs provide a frame around these five chapters. The events, teachings, and revelations of these chapters are summed up at their beginning and their end by repeated verbiage. These two paragraphs describe both Jesus’s ministry as teaching and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and his compassionate healing of diseases and infirmities (cf. 4:23 and 9:35). This is precisely what occurs in the intervening chapters—the famous Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7) and a collection of physical-healing stories in chapters 8–9. The sermon provides Jesus’s clearest teachings about the coming kingdom of heaven, and chapters 8–9 provide several examples of Jesus’s compassionate healing ministry, interspersed with spiritual healings or callings of disciples. These latter examples are just as much about the kingdom as the sermon is, for healings are pictures of God’s restorative kingdom.³¹ Thus, Matthew provides for us a full-orbed and unmistakable definition of “the gospel of/about the kingdom”; it is the message and reality that God’s kingship or reign has now come in Jesus. Jesus teaches about what this “here and yet to be” kingdom is like regarding both the virtue and the character of its disciples and the kind of healing and

30. This is again why I do not find compelling Kingsbury’s or Stanton’s arguments for Matthew as the originator of “Gospel” as a narrative reference. These two later uses of *euangelion* in 24:14 and 26:13 both contain *touto* not because they are references to Matthew’s written document but because they are anaphorically and intratextually pointing back to his previous uses in 4:23 and 9:35, which provide the definition.

31. To the modern mind they do not seem to be readily connected, but in the biblical witness, the hope of the return of God’s reign was very much a hope for healing of all sorts of brokenness, as Isa. 40–66 most clearly depicts. See further below on “Gospel(ize) in Isaiah.”

restoration that it brings. The proclamation of both John the Baptist (3:2) and Jesus have been identical (4:17): “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Now this is unpacked and specified as “the gospel of the kingdom.” Thus, as in Mark but with greater explanation, we see once again that the “gospel” according to the evangelists is the message of the return of the restorative reign of God.

“Gospel(ize)” in Luke

Our third stop on the tour of the evangelists’ self-understanding of the “gospel” is the fertile land of Luke’s narrative. Although Luke does not use the noun form *euangelion*, he emphasizes and explains this same idea, using the LXX verbal form *euangelizomai*, “to proclaim good news.”³² Ten times this word appears, spanning the entirety of the Gospel. Twice in the birth narratives it is used to describe the angel’s message, first to Zechariah (1:19) and second to the sleepy shepherds on the night of Jesus’s birth (2:10). This latter reference is unpacked for us with the information that this announcement is one of “great joy for all peoples” and is about a “Savior, who is Christ the Lord,” born in the city of David. The eschatological, Davidic, salvific, and regal focus of this explanation is not difficult to discern. Nor is this new information for the readers of Luke’s Gospel. He has already made clear that it is the expectation by the explicit promise that the angel Gabriel gives Mary concerning her son: “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:32–33). The kingship focus is the dominant note.

In the rest of the narrative this same verb is used to describe John the Baptist’s ministry (3:18) as well as Jesus’s (4:43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1). It is interesting and important to note that in several of these verses the verb is followed by and explained with reference to the kingdom, providing a striking parallel to Matthew’s phraseology, but with the necessary adjustments because of the verb rather than noun form of the *euangel-* root.³³ Luke also parallels Matthew by using *euangelizomai* in the quote from Isaiah 61:1, which Jesus employs to describe to the imprisoned John the Baptist his healing and new creational

32. This verb occurs around seventy-five times in the Greek Bible, including twenty-three times in Rahlfs’s edition of the LXX. The noun form also occurs around seventy-five times in the Greek Bible, but only once in the LXX, in 2 Reigns (MT, 2 Sam.) 4:10. Horbury also notes occurrences of the word found in particular manuscript witnesses to the LXX. See Horbury, “‘Gospel’ in Herodian Judaea,” 15–16.

33. In Luke 4:43 Jesus says that it is necessary for him to preach the gospel regarding the kingdom of God (*euangelisasthai me dei tēn basileian tou theou*). This is also the description used in 8:1 (*euangelizomenos tēn basileian tou theou*) and 16:16 (*hē basileia tou theou euangelizetai*). Luke 9:6 and 20:1 do not have this full phrasing, but there is every indication that the reference is the same here, based on all the other uses of *euangelizomai* throughout Luke’s Gospel.

ministry (Luke 7:22; cf. Matt. 11:5). This parallel between Matthew and Luke finds another fulfillment in the most significant use of *euangelizomai* in Luke, in 4:18. We have already seen that Matthew carefully defines the gospel as being about God's kingdom (4:23; 9:35; 24:14), particularly with its twofold manifestation in (1) teachings about the virtue of kingdom citizens (the Sermon, chaps. 5–7) and (2) the restoration of the broken (chaps. 8–9). Luke's view is precisely the same, though his presentation is different. To introduce Jesus's public ministry, Luke relates Jesus's post-temptation return to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (4:14). Jesus enters the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and chooses to read for the hearers Isaiah 61:1. Nothing seems overly unusual until Jesus, rather than expositing this prophetic promise, sits down and informs everyone, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). This young, eager man hoping in God's kingdom restoration might be forgiven his overzealous words, but Jesus crosses the line when he claims for himself the mantle of this same prophet and reminds his elders that through prophets God judges his people (4:23–27). The result is wrath and an attempt to extinguish Jesus by casting him over a cliff (4:28–30). The point for us is how Luke has chosen to introduce and frame Jesus's ministry—it is the Spirit-empowered, joy-bringing, burden-lifting, captive-freeing message that "the favorable year of the Lord" has come, that is, the restoration of God's ways and reign on earth. Thus, Luke accords with his Synoptic brethren in emphasizing the "good news" of the gospel and defining this "Gospel" as the message about God's restorative reign.

"Gospel(ize)" in Isaiah

Finally in our effort to see how the Gospels define the "gospel," we may turn not to the Fourth Gospel but to the fifth, as it came to be considered in the early church,³⁴ the book of Isaiah.³⁵ Here we find that *euangelizomai* plays

34. For a brief survey of the predominant use of Isaiah in the early church, see John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–2, 42–64. See also Brevard Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

35. This is not to exclude the Gospel of John from our theological construction of what "gospel" means, but only to note that because he does not use any form of the *euangel-* word group, the Fourth Gospel cannot help us in our examination of the function of these words in the NT. While John clearly has his own distinctives, some of which are significant, one would be hard pressed to argue that he has an entirely different view of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection than do the Synoptics; he does not. What he calls the word or message about eternal life, the other evangelists, in tune with Paul, call the "Gospel." Moreover, by its canonical placement the Gospel of John has always been considered just that, another rendering of "the gospel." This is the case even to the extent that the manuscript and interpretive traditions consistently place it in such a way that it breaks up the obvious two-part work of Luke-Acts so that the four "Gospels" are kept together. For us to separate it from the other accounts on the basis of

a crucial role.³⁶ We have just seen that Luke chooses Isaiah as the avenue through which to describe Jesus's ministry. In this he is not alone among the New Testament writers, nor is Isaiah 61 the only place to which he could have turned. Richard Hays rightly observes that the evangelists are concerned to show that Jesus's teachings, actions, death, and vindication "constituted the continuation and climax of the ancient biblical story" and that the Old Testament was the "*generative milieu* for the gospels, the original environment in which the first Christian traditions were conceived, formed and nurtured."³⁷ The book of Isaiah, and especially the forward vision of chapters 40–66, ranks as one of the deepest and broadest Old Testament wells from which the New Testament authors draw. Isaiah 40–66 is of the utmost importance for the Gospels' self-understanding and proclamation. Sprinkled throughout all the Gospels, but especially Matthew and Luke, are direct quotations, strong allusions, and subtle echoes from Isaiah. We can say without overstatement that the eschatological vision of Isaiah 40–66 serves as the primary subtext and framing for the Gospels' witness.³⁸ This is not a new insight, as is witnessed by the centrality of Isaiah in Christian interpretation, in everything from homily and commentary to Handel's famous oratorio *Messiah*, which begins with the tenor aria "Comfort, O Comfort my People" (from Isa. 40:1).

What is this Isaianic eschatological vision? *It is the hope in the restoration of God's reign.* Isaiah describes it with a full artist's palette of vibrant colors. It is comfort and tenderness from God (40:1, 2, 11; 51:5; 52:9; 54:7–8; 55:7; 61:2–3), the presence of God himself (41:10; 43:5; 45:14; 52:12), help for the poor and

surface differences would be nothing less than irresponsible. On the tradition of Luke as part of the fourfold canon rather than as part of "Luke-Acts" as in the modern period, see C. Kavin Rowe, "History, Hermeneutics and the Unity of Luke-Acts," *JSNT* 28, no. 2 (2005): 131–57.

36. The *euangel-* word group occurs a few places other than in Isaiah, but only in this prophet does it seem to bear much theological weight. In its other few uses, especially clustered in the story of 2 Sam. 18, it seems to mean simply "report of good news."

37. Richard B. Hays, "The Canonical Matrix of the Gospels," in Barton, *Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, 53.

38. An early article articulating this is Klyne Snodgrass, "Streams of Tradition Emerging from Isaiah 40.1–5 and Their Adaptation in the New Testament," *JSNT* 8 (1980): 24–45. Since then several significant monographs have been written in this same vein, in addition to countless essays. See inter alia Ricki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, WUNT vol. 2, no. 88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); and David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000). For works on the Isaiah background to "gospel," one can consult Hays's "Canonical Matrix of the Gospels"; Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*; and Klyne Snodgrass, "The Gospel of Jesus," in Bockmuehl and Hagner, *Written Gospel*, 31–44. More generally, in his extensive works N. T. Wright has argued for Jesus's self-understanding to be that of fulfilling the story of Israel, the story that clearly has as its beginning (and end) the Exodus, especially as this is refigured in Isaiah. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) and his *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). For the discussion of the Isaianic background to the meaning of "gospel," see Wright's *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 40–44.

needy (40:29–31; 41:17; 55:1–2), the renewing of all things (42:9–10; 43:18–19; 48:6; 65:17; 66:22), the judgment of God’s enemies (42:13–17; 47:1–15; 49:22–26; 66:15–17, 24), the healing of blindness and deafness (42:18; 43:8–10), the forgiving of sins (44:22; 53:4–6, 10–12), and the making of a covenant (41:6; 49:8; 55:3; 59:21). All of this will be accomplished through God’s anointed, humble Servant (42:1–4; 45:4; 49:3–5; 52:13–53:12) and witnesses (43:10; 44:8). To read Isaiah 40–66 is to be washed over with a vision of God’s power and grace. And this is why this vision is described six times in the LXX as the proclamation of good news, *euangelizomai* (40:9 [2x]; 52:7 [2x]; 60:6; 61:1). It is the good news of salvation (60:6), the restoration of God’s people (61:1ff.), God coming with his might (40:9), and most simply and comprehensively, the proclamation that “your God reigns!” (52:7). This beautiful Isaianic mural of hope is evoked continually in the Gospels via the evangelists’ reference to it and outlining of Jesus’s ministry with its brushstrokes.

Provisional Definition

This extended reflection on the Scriptures’ uses of “gospel” allows us to now offer a provisional definition. It must remain provisional until we explore the other part of our definitions discussion, the related question of the Gospels’ genre. But for now we can observe that the New Testament authors, building especially on the Isaianic vision, define the “gospel” as Jesus’s effecting the long-awaited return of God himself as King, in the power of the Spirit bringing his people back from exile and into the true promised land of a new creation, forgiving their sins,³⁹ and fulfilling all the promises of God and the hopes of his people. This Isaianic vision is itself based on God’s work at the exodus, which the prophets take up and reappropriate to describe God’s future work.⁴⁰ Because of this vision, described as the proclamation of good news, the apostles call their kerygma “gospel,” and it is why the evangelists likewise

39. It is very important that we note this essential aspect of what the “Gospel” is for both Isaiah and the evangelists. In the recent rediscovery of the kingdom-centrality of Jesus’s message of the “gospel” there has often been a naive and sophomoric pendulum swing away from the essentiality of Jesus’s atoning death on behalf of his people. Not only is sacrificial atonement clearly testified to as essential in the apostolic witness (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 3:18), it is also the obvious endgame of all four Gospels, one of the few ways in which all the witnesses are in total agreement and emphasis. But if this were not enough, one only has to read Isa. 40–66 to see that this theme is at the heart of the “good news” Isaiah is sent to proclaim, as witnessed in 52:13–53:12. As mentioned above, McKnight’s *King Jesus Gospel* keeps in balance the important ideas of the gospel as both broad restoration and the individual’s need for forgiveness of sins through Jesus’s death and resurrection.

40. Although Hengel does not note the importance of the Isaiah influence on the NT “gospel,” he clearly sees its deeper roots in the exodus. Hengel, along with many others, sees the essential root of the *euangelion* in the radically new eschatological message that the exodus is to be reinterpreted in light of the dawning of Jesus Christ. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 161. This

describe the work of Jesus and the narratives about him as *euangelion*. In this there is univocality; Paul and the Gospel writers all understand their message to be one of God's reign coming in the person of Jesus through the power of the Spirit.⁴¹ The "gospel," whether in oral or written form, is the message of God's comprehensively restorative kingdom.

comes from Hengel's concluding chapter intriguingly titled "Torah and Gospel as Narratives of Two Different Saving Events."

41. For examples of the kingdom emphasis in Paul's understanding of the gospel, see Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:11; 2 Tim. 4:18. For works on this topic, see Brian Vickers, "The Kingdom of God in Paul's Gospel," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008): 52–67; David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study of New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992); Frances Young, "Paul and the Kingdom of God," in *The Kingdom of God and Human Society*, ed. R. S. Barbour (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993). See also chap. 3 of this volume.