

CHAPTER TEN

THE GOSPELS

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THE GOSPEL MESSAGE AND THE GOSPELS

In the biblical world itself, in contrast to the post-biblical world of later interpretation, the word 'gospel' (Greek *euangelion*) does not denote a type of literature, namely the four texts that make up the first half of the New Testament, but the proclamation of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

In classical Greek the singular noun is rare and is used technically in reference to the payment made to someone who brings glad tidings; the more normal term to refer to the content of the message is, as in English, the plural, 'good news' (*euangelia*). This typically denotes the announcement of some cause for *public* rejoicing, like a victory in battle or the birth of an heir to the throne. The impoverished under-classes of the Roman Empire probably did not greet such announcements of 'good news' with any great enthusiasm, for they would have served only to reinforce the old world order. In a lively linguistic innovation, Paul or some other early Christian used 'gospel' in the singular to refer to the contents of the only genuinely good news. Building on the use of the verb in the Old Testament (e.g. Isa. 40.9; 52.7; 61.1), he coined this semi-technical term to sum up the heart of a world-changing and subversive message of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet believed to be Messiah and Son of God, and expected to return soon to raise the dead and establish a reign of justice for the poor.

The cross of Jesus was good news because it was not what it appeared to be, the torture and humiliation of yet another victim of Roman state terrorism. It was rather the sacrifice that paid the price of sin, ordained of God and fulfilling scriptural prophecy. It was good news because believers could enter into this event by a leap of spiritual and ethical imagination, made visible and concrete in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and die to their old selves (or even be 'crucified with' Christ, Gal. 2.19). Above all, it was good news because it was the moment when a dramatic shift in the timetable of universal history had occurred, for on the third day God raised him from the dead. Similarly, the resurrection of Jesus was not what it at first appeared to be, a freak phenomenon of physical resuscitation or wish-fulfilment on the part of his demoralized followers; it was good news because the end-time hope of a new world had been anticipated and guaranteed in one representative instance,

and the risen Christ who had thus been designated to come again soon to judge the world was also the one who, as the Wisdom of God, created the world in the first place, and is the explanation of all that happens in salvation-history between the beginning and the end. All of this is what 'gospel' meant for Paul and arguably it is still what the word means for the writers of what we call the Synoptic Gospels, when they occasionally use it (e.g. Matt. 26.13; Mark 1.15; Luke 9.6).

In New Testament scholarship, the early Christian message of salvation outlined in the previous paragraph is normally referred to as the *kerygma* (the Greek word for 'proclamation'), in order to avoid any confusion with the literary category of 'gospel'. It is a matter of continuing scholarly dispute whether and to what extent a distinction needs to be made between the Pauline *kerygma* and other early *kerygmata*. We are entirely dependent for direct knowledge of the first three decades of Christian history on the authentic letters of Paul, and so we do not know whether his way of presenting the gospel to mainly Gentile audiences, with hardly any use of the sayings of Jesus (only certainly 1 Cor. 11.23–5) and no reference to any incident prior to his passion, was typical of the movement as a whole. If it was, interest in the life-story of Jesus as a medium through which to proclaim the good news may have developed only in the second, post-Pauline, generation. But it is perhaps more likely that other early missionaries would have appealed more often to Jesus' life and teaching than Paul does in his letters, although, as Paul himself says (see Gal. 2.7), all agreed on the basic content of the gospel. There is no evidence (*pace* Crossan 1999: 239–56, and others, e.g. Koester 1990) that a very different kind of early *kerygma*, which focused exclusively on Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom, existed alongside and in competition with the gospel of the cross and resurrection. The hypothetical Q sayings source presupposes (see the lament over Jerusalem, Luke 13.34–5 and par.) the rejection, and indeed vindication, of Jesus in the line of Israel's prophets. Only by a highly tendentious process of selection and isolation of certain Q traditions and by equally speculative claims about the antiquity and significance of the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* can such a dichotomy between two types of early Christianity be sustained.

How, then, are we to explain the development from Paul's gospel to what the New Testament Gospels contain? There is clearly a move away from the existential and universal and towards the historical and particular, and thus towards the very *Jewish* detail of the life of Jesus. Various explanations of this move are possible: the influx of non-Jews into the Church may have made it necessary to be more explicit about the Jewish matrix of Christian belief in Jesus as God's Messiah; delay in the expected Parousia may have led to a greater consciousness of the movement's continuing existence over time and the consequent need to establish its identity by a recovery of origins; devotion to the heavenly Saviour may have become so strong in Christian spirituality that doubts were beginning to be raised (cf. 1 John 4.2) about his identification with the one who was 'born of a woman' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. In addition to such general stimuli towards the writing of the Gospels, each of them is probably also responding to particular needs and circumstances.

The construction of life-stories of Jesus creates at first an epistemological distance between reader and the central figure in the narrative; the lordship of Christ as the object of faith is no longer being apprehended directly, but indirectly through the

medium of authoritative tradition. The four evangelists seem to be aware of this danger and adopt different strategies to cope with it. But the common purpose of the New Testament Gospels is to express through the form of a selective story about Jesus, dealing mainly with his public career and its final week, an urgent summons to believe in him as Christ and Son of God. The focus on the person and life of Jesus arises, then, not so much from biographical curiosity, as from the basic religious commitment of early Christians that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5.19).

The four Gospels were produced by Greek-speaking Christians probably in the eastern Mediterranean during the last third of the first century. Attempts to claim that Matthew and John are translations of underlying Aramaic texts or that Mark was first composed in Latin are generally now considered unconvincing. While some still argue for a western provenance for Mark or Luke (i.e. Rome), the trend in recent scholarship has been to locate them all in Christian communities in Syria, Asia Minor or Greece, such as Antioch, Ephesus or Corinth, which were the historic centres of the Pauline mission field. The surprising neglect of the Jesus tradition in Paul's own letters, noted above, implies that the Gospels themselves, if not their narrative style of proclaiming the good news, appeared only after his day, and the allusions in each to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Mark 13.2; Matt. 22.7; Luke 19.13; John 2.19) confirm a dating near or sometime after that event.

The literary relations between the Gospels provides some information about their relative chronology: Mark was probably the first and was used as the basis for Matthew and Luke. John's Gospel, preserving a largely independent stream of tradition, may reflect knowledge of the Synoptics at the latest stage of its editing, for it appears to have been re-edited after the death of its original author (21.24). The earliest patristic citations and manuscript evidence on papyrus put the *terminus ante quem* for the gospels at around 110 CE.

The titles of the Gospels, 'According to Mark', and so on, distinguishing them by named apostles or co-workers of apostles, are almost certainly later additions and not to be relied on (*pace* Hengel 2000). They could not have been added before the word 'gospel' had come to denote a type of literature, and that did not happen before the mid-second century, when it became clear that the Church needed to authenticate its traditional books, over against more recent products, by attaching to them explicit claims to apostolic authorship. The original works we know as the New Testament Gospels are themselves anonymous and deliberately so: for their authors to have identified themselves would have been an inappropriate claim to 'copyright' over what was essentially the common property of Christian communities.

WHAT IS A GOSPEL?

An answer to this question has been implied above, in terms of the contents and function of the books so designated in the New Testament. Many scholars would consider this to be a sufficient answer. The more precise question of their literary type or *genre* seems to be irrelevant, for it implies too high an estimate of the literary pretensions of their authors and the literary competence of their audiences. The New Testament Gospels are not 'high literature', so we should not expect them to fit into

the conventional classifications familiar to the leisured and cultured élite of Graeco-Roman society.

If we define genre less strictly as a certain set of expectations that readers bring to any particular text based on their previous acquaintance with literature of a similar type, then the generic problem as regards the Gospels can be summed up in the following way. There is nothing to show that the intended readers of the Gospels were acquainted with any literature other than the Jewish scriptures (and this is probably true of their authors too, with the possible exception of Luke, see Acts 17.28), and there is very little in Jewish scripture that is sufficiently similar to the Gospels to explain how their first readers would have received them. The Old Testament contains no proper example of biography. The tales of Abraham, Moses, David and Elijah in Jewish scripture are not told continuously or for their own sakes; the episodes that are selected are subordinated to a larger plot, telling the life-story of God with his people, Israel; there is no attempt to analyse character as the key to the events in the story. There are some partial parallels between the Gospels and prophetic histories like the Elijah-Elisha cycle in Kings (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13), with apocalyptic history, like the book of Daniel, or with a novel like Tobit, but they are insufficient to explain the large-scale structures, tone or purpose of the Christian texts.

One broad description of the Gospels as 'passion narratives with extended introductions' has often been quoted since it was formulated by the neo-Lutheran systematician, Martin Kähler, in 1882 (1964: 80 n.). It was endorsed, in particular, by the form-critics who understood the Gospels to have developed backwards from their passion narratives, where their similarity to each other is most pronounced. The 'remembering of the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11.23) or the graphic portrayal of Christ crucified (Gal. 3.1; 1 Cor. 1.23) was the centre of the *kerygma*, and other material was added simply to explain how and why the story ends the way it does. There is still much to be said in favour of this view, especially in regard to Mark and John. For in both cases, the coming passion overshadows the story from the beginning. At John 1.29 already Jesus is announced as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' and, after a series of minor clashes with opponents, already at Mark 3.6 they are plotting Jesus' death. However, this definition fails to do justice to the movement in the other direction, not simply from the passion backwards but also from salvation-history forwards towards its fulfilment. The latter emphasis is clearest in Matthew and Luke, but it is not absent from the other two. Furthermore, the messages about the Kingdom in the Synoptics or, in the Fourth Gospel, about eternal life through faith in the Word incarnate, are not properly understood as introductory elements but are separate themes and can in a certain sense be appreciated apart from the passion narrative.

Recent investigations into the Hellenistic background of the New Testament have revived the attempt to classify the Gospels as 'ancient popular biography' (see Talbert 1977; Burridge 1991). As a descriptive category there can be no objection to calling the Gospels biography; modern literary historians are free to group similar writings together as they see fit. But as a prescriptive category there are several problems with this classification. Ancient works that have 'life' (*bios*) in their title are usually about some great figure from the past and they pretend (at least) to be objective

(Plutarch; Diogenes Laertius). But works about contemporaries or near contemporaries that are really eulogies in narrative form are not normally called 'lives'. Furthermore, the Gospel-writers pass over in silence the 'formative years' of their subject and apart from the incident in the Temple when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2.41-51) include no premonitions of greatness to come. The teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics is not principally intended to illustrate the character of the teacher but the character of the Kingdom whose coming he announces. The sharp contrast between the miraculous acts of power in the ministry and the utter powerlessness of the passion is left unresolved even by the resurrection stories. Certainly the Gospels aim to achieve the strong personal attachment of the audience to their central figure, but it is an attachment that is wider and deeper than the admiration evoked by biography. Some of their more educated readers no doubt recognized certain similarities between the Church's Gospels and the biographies they knew, but the evangelists and the audience for whom they initially wrote would probably not have made any connection.

When Justin Martyr in the mid-second century (Apology 106) wanted a literary classification in which to place the Gospels he called them the 'memorabilia' of the apostles (Greek *apomnēmoneumata*, like Xenophon's classic of that title), a term that emphasizes the privileged vantage point of the authors as witnesses, rather than the nature of their subject matter.

Several other attempts have been made to connect the Gospels with types of hellenistic literature in pure or mixed forms: memorabilia mixed with elements of Jewish prophecy (so Robbins 1984), aretalogy (so Hadas and Smith 1965) and tragedy (so Bilezikian 1992). These throw some light on certain aspects of the Gospels but leave others unexplained. More recently, Mary Ann Tolbert (1989: 44) has proposed that we should look for parallels to Mark's Gospel lower down the aesthetic scale of Hellenistic literature and she points to several similarities between Mark and popular romantic novels (ibid. 75). Self-evidently, the Gospels are not themselves romances, but their odd mixture of historiographical form with epic and dramatic substance, their loose episodic plots with summaries and fore-shadowings and stock characters, point to a *subliterary* oral genre, which has, unusually in the case of the Gospels, been preserved in writing, while most other examples of it, naturally enough, have disappeared.

In short, there is no simple answer to the question of genre. Just as Paul developed the letter-form to become a vehicle for preaching and moral exhortation, so also the writers of the Gospels used storytelling for their own kerygmatic and didactic purposes. It would be too much to say that they invented a wholly new genre: or at least it was not apparent that they had done so, until the four books were put together with a standard title in the Church's canon of scripture. Before then, it is more appropriate to look at each of the books separately and ask about the structure, contents, mood and purpose of each. Attentive listeners, acquainted with the discourse of early Christian groups, would not need to know what type of literature this was; they could pick up the thread as they went along.

MARK

Mark's Gospel is generally reckoned to be the earliest of the four. Since it is almost entirely reproduced in one or both of the other Synoptics, there would be little point in its composition if it came later. Its supposed priority has made it the object of intense scholarly interest and debate over the last 150 years.

At first, it was hoped that Mark, as the earliest Gospel, would provide a 'royal road' to the historical Jesus, what lawyers would call a good witness: accurate, detailed, and none too bright. This is implied in the earliest patristic testimony about the origins of the Gospels. Papias, writing about 125 CE (his remarks are preserved by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15), retails the opinion of the 'presbyter' that 'Mark, indeed, who became the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, as far as he remembered them, the things said or done by the Lord, but not however in order'. Papias goes on to explain that the lack of order (presumably in comparison with Matthew's tidy rearrangement) was due to Peter's practice of adapting his preaching 'to suit the needs of the moment'; but he insists that Mark's book was, nevertheless, a full and accurate record of what Peter used to say.

This defence of the apostolicity and accuracy of Mark does not stand up to closer scrutiny. Already, at the turn of the twentieth century, William Wrede argued that one of Mark's most typical features, the so-called messianic secret, was not the result of historical reminiscence — that is to say, it did not reflect a policy on the part of Jesus during his lifetime to keep his messiahship a secret — but was a secondary theological motif, which showed that this Gospel was no less a product of post-Easter Christian beliefs than the others. The secrecy theme comprises all or some of the following: the command to disciples not to reveal Jesus' identity (8.30) until after his resurrection (9.9), the silencing of demons who have supernatural knowledge of Jesus as Son of God (3.12), the ban placed on the disclosure of (some of) Jesus' miracles (e.g. 5.43), the allegorical form of Jesus' parables understood as a deliberate attempt to prevent the crowds from understanding the secret (Mark 4.10–12). Putting all this material together, the conclusion seemed unavoidable: the secrecy theme was a way of accommodating the (Pauline) understanding of the gospel of the death and resurrection within the framework of a story about Jesus, in other words of delaying the climactic moment of revelation till the end of the book. For Christ cannot truly be known simply 'after the flesh' (cf. 2 Cor. 5.21): one can only know him truly as the crucified and risen one.

Mark figured prominently in the next most important development in gospel study, the rise of form-criticism (see esp. Bultmann 1921; Dibelius 1933). The lack of order in his account of the ministry of Jesus, already noticed by Papias's presbyter, the general absence of indications of time and place, the breathless haste and the compression of the narrative, with a brief Galilean ministry, one journey to Jerusalem, and then the trial and passion, were due to the writer's imposition of a rather simplified storyline upon a diverse stock of separate, independently circulating oral traditions. Close inspection of these revealed that they fall into a limited number of stereotypes — miracles, conflict dialogues, sayings, parables, and so forth. Mark's Gospel was dismantled, like the Jerusalem Temple, so that no stone was left standing on another. Apart from the messianic secret, the evangelist was viewed as a mere

scribe and compiler of community traditions, hardly worthy to be called an author in the true sense. Of course while dismembering the author, this approach also 'remembered' the lived experience in all its variety of early Christian communities: it seemed a small price to pay.

Doubts about the ability of form-criticism to explain the total phenomenon of Mark were already being expressed by R. H. Lightfoot when he introduced the English-speaking public to the method in his Bampton Lectures of 1934. The order of paragraphs in the account of the ministry was not as haphazard or arbitrary as it might appear. The writer had juxtaposed incidents or enfolded one within another in such a way that they interpret each other (see e.g. the cleansing of the Temple, sandwiched between the cursing and withering of the fig tree, Mark 11.12-21). There was clearly an individual mind at work, even if he was constrained to stay within the limits of the traditional way of recounting the 'things concerning Jesus'. It was almost inevitable that, as scholars ran out of things to say about the history of traditions before Mark, their attention should be drawn back to the editing or 'redaction' of them. But what started as a supplement to the earlier approach soon became its competitor, disputing the origins of much of the contents of the Gospel. Eventually, this rivalry would lead to the erosion of the very distinction between tradition and redaction on which the competing methods both depended.

Early redaction-criticism was no less a 'sociological' method than form-criticism. It agreed that the Gospels were not *belles-lettres* to entertain and inform an educated audience but expressions of the living faith of a community. It differed in its determination to throw light on Mark's own community and its concerns as the controlling factors in the composition of the Gospel. For example the Little Apocalypse (chapter 13) had formerly been treated as a kind of 'fossil' representing an earlier crisis of persecution and expectation for imminent rescue by the coming of the Son of Man. But redaction-criticism saw it instead as a 'window' into the contemporary experience of Mark's church. The genre of Mark as a whole (and not just ch. 13) could be described as 'apocalypse mediated through narrative': its focus was still on the imminent future. In other words, Mark was not historicizing the *kerygma* by writing down a story about the past: he was kerygmatising history in the light of its fast-approaching end. The Markan community was attempting to make sense of its external situation of persecution and suffering, whether in Rome under Nero – the traditional setting – or in Palestine during the Revolt of 66-70 CE (Marxsen 1956), by appeal to the Jewish model of the eschatological tribulation of the saints as a sign that the cosmic struggle between good and evil was about to reach its climax (Robinson 1957).

As redaction-criticism developed, however, it began to concentrate more on what might have been happening within the community. The change in perspective from external to internal factors as determinative for the selection and editing of the Church's traditions about Jesus is noteworthy. It arises from the observation, largely correct, that early Christian groups, as evidenced by Paul's epistles, seem to have been oblivious to the politics of the time in which they lived (Rom. 13.1-7 was, for instance, written when Nero sat on the imperial throne!), and obsessed with inner-church controversy. The starting point for the new approach was the peculiarly negative portrayal of the disciples in Mark (Tyson 1961), taken as indicating

an internal theological conflict within his community (Weeden 1971). For, the disciples in the text represent not model Christians, as one might have expected, but increasingly blind and arrogant opponents of Jesus' (and thus the evangelist's) teaching on the necessity of suffering. The conflict between Jesus and the disciples is understood as an inner-church theological conflict between miracle-working power and the way of the cross. Paul's argument with false apostles, especially in 2 Corinthians 10–13, provides the template for this reconstruction. The Gospel of Mark is a thinly veiled reflection of a similar dispute within the Church, and its genre is, in effect, that of 'a controversial treatise on Christology', and, when competently decoded, everything can be seen to be directly relevant to it.

But is this at all plausible? Why does Mark include so many miracle stories, and summaries of others, if they contribute nothing to a proper understanding of Christ, and lead only to misunderstanding? And why does Mark attribute deviant views to Peter, James and John, whose authority it would be surely impossible, by the time he was writing, to contradict, and not to someone like Judas who would deserve any calumny heaped upon him? One of the methodological consequences of the redaction-critical determination to provide a total explanation of the Gospel by reference to the theological outlook and contemporary setting of the evangelist is that it becomes unnecessary to make any distinction between tradition and redaction.

This has given rise in more recent scholarship to 'holistic' readings of the Gospel of two rather different kinds. Narrative criticism (see Rhoads and Michie 1982; Fowler 1991) has insisted upon the significance of story as the generic category that most obviously fits the Gospel, and applied to it the literary-critical techniques that are appropriate to this genre: synchronic attention to the narrative as a whole; the narrator's 'point of view' and persuasive strategies; the development of plot and characters within the text and the involvement of the implied readers in the construction of its overall meaning. Many new insights have been gained by this method, but its neglect of factors external to the narrative leads also to the extreme position of Mark as novelistic fiction (Kermode 1979) or myth of origins (Mack 1988).

Socio-political readings (see Waetjen 1989; Myers 1990) draw upon insights from the sociology of literature and liberation exegesis for their own holistic approach to Mark. They ask questions about the ideological stance of the author and his readers particularly with regard to the economic conditions of their contemporary social context, the ownership of land, taxation, vagrancy and class solidarity. Again, many new insights have been gained, but Mark's Gospel is too concerned with religious faith and an otherworldly, eschatological conception of salvation from sin and death for its genre to be described as that of 'political manifesto'.

I have given above a brief survey of scholarly disputes about method and conflicting proposals about genre that arise not from comparison with other texts but from the examination of the contents and likely purposes of this one. The question of Mark's genre is, in this sense, subject to constant revision and reappraisal, and there is always room for new proposals. In the last part of this section I shall offer some observations on the likely format, style and actual content of Mark's Gospel that point towards a rather different conclusion to those mentioned so far.

Critics have rarely asked what Mark's book looked like, physically. It is noticeably *much shorter* than the other three, which are all the length of a standard ancient scroll. Although this is disputed, the Gospel seems to have lost its final sentences or paragraph. The certainly authentic text finishes at 16.8, and two alternative endings, both very different in style to Mark's, have been added in the manuscript tradition to make up the deficiency. A scroll is unlikely to lose its end (it is the best protected part): but the risk is much greater with a codex (there are many examples of incomplete codices among the papyri). And the length of a codex is not, as in the case of a scroll, more or less predetermined. If Mark was written in codex form, what would that imply? The scroll was the proper format for Jewish religious text and serious Graeco-Roman literature. In the pre-Christian period, the codex was mostly used for business purposes. Especially in the case of Mark, which is so short, the codex has a singular advantage over the scroll: it can be easily carried about. It is unlikely that such a book would be reproduced in multiple copies for sale. It would rather have been read aloud to assembled companies of adherents or interested enquirers. Mark's Gospel is not an attempt to record the story of Jesus for posterity, that is, for preservation over time, but to spread the good news to other contemporaries, that is, for transportation over distances. As with the Pauline letter-form, so also with the Marcan Gospel-form, geographical necessity was the mother of literary invention.

The style of Mark is that of the spoken word. This widely acknowledged fact has usually been taken as an indication of its *origin* in the Church's oral tradition; but it may also throw light on Mark's *purpose*, that is, that the book was intended to be performed in popular oral contexts. Mark then would have been an oral storyteller who decided at some stage to write down one particular performance of his tale: the tradition is, in other words, just as Marcan as the redaction.

The book starts with a verbless sentence that may be its title. 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' It would be anachronistic to interpret this as 'Here begins the gospel . . .', because, as we have seen, 'gospel' is not used in the literary sense in the New Testament. Although the 'beginning' (*archē*) usually has a temporal meaning, it may also imply priority in importance (see Heb. 6.1) and, if so, the book's title might be rendered, 'Basic Preaching about Jesus'. The opening scenes of the Gospel suggest that one of Mark's main interests is missionary preaching. The first character to appear is John the itinerant preacher of a baptism of repentance. Jesus, after his own baptism and anointing as Spirit-filled Son of God, continues the mission to preach the gospel (1.15) and his first public act is to call others to join him as 'fishers of men' (1.16–20). The theme of mission is strongly emphasized in the first half-chapter and continues through later scenes where the gospel is proclaimed in acts of healing and exorcism, by debates with opponents and implicitly through parables and the two feeding miracles, which disclose the secret plan of God to open the gospel to all.

Despite all the scholarly discussion about a *messianic* secret in Mark, the noun 'secret' (*mysterion*) only occurs once, in reference to the parables (4.10–12) and there it has nothing to do with Jesus' messiahship and everything to do with mission, the mystery of why some people respond to the word and others for various reasons do not (4.13–20). The quotation from Isaiah 6.9f. is used also by Paul (Rom. 11.7) in

his attempt to explain the 'mystery' of missionary failure and success (see Rom. 11.25).

After the mission charge (6.6–12), delayed to enhance its dramatic contrast with the rejection of Jesus by his own townsfolk (6.1–6), there is a section that begins and ends with miraculous feedings (6.30–44 and 8.1–10). They form a bracket around a private conversation with a Gentile woman (7.27–9), which offers the clue to their puzzling significance. The emphasis in the feeding stories is not on the miracle itself or on Jesus as miracle-worker, but on the unused leftovers (see 8.17–20), and this is explained by the words of Jesus: 'Let the children first be fed. It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' and the Syro-Phoenician woman's quick-witted response: 'Yes, Lord, but even the dogs beneath the table eat the children's leftovers.' The mission to Israel has priority, as it did for Paul (Rom. 1.17), but Israel's decline into hardness of heart and rejection of the gospel require extraordinary means, if it is to be turned to good purpose (again see Rom. 11.11–12).

The suffering Messiah is a stumbling-block even to his closest followers (see 8.33) and the second half of Mark's Gospel dwells on this theme, and includes disciples themselves in various kinds of 'suffering' for the sake of the gospel (8.35), poverty, homelessness, apostolic care for all the churches (10.30) and humble service (9.35; 10.43) as well as the threat of violence and literal martyrdom (13.9, 11f.). But the time between the resurrection and Parousia of the Son of Man will be filled not just with suffering but with the proclamation of the gospel to all nations (13.10.) Already, at the moment of his death, the first Gentile convert is won over to the new faith (15.39). And the promise (14.28; 16.7) that Jesus will go before his disciples into Galilee, the threshold of the Gentile world, is among other things a promise of the power of the risen Christ in the missionary work of the Church.

Thus, the whole content of Mark's Gospel continually focuses on mission, in particular towards non-Jews. It hints also at a profound theology of mission: Mark is attempting to explain the riddle of Christianity, that faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah should be increasingly rejected by Jews and yet accepted more and more by Gentiles. In this context, his practice of using the 'things concerning Jesus' as the medium for preaching was itself somewhat problematic. Should the Church not rather play down its Jewish roots? But without them Jesus of Nazareth would not remain the centre of Christian worship and life. So Mark resolves this dilemma by showing that Jesus anticipated and endorsed the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. He presents Jesus' teaching and miracles, as well as his crucifixion, as possible occasions of misunderstanding and rejection. For 'signs' and 'wisdom' are not sufficient to elicit saving faith – as Paul also asserts (1 Cor. 1.22f); the stumbling-block of the cross is the true power and wisdom of God. By portraying even the Jewish disciples as temporarily blind to this truth, Mark offers hope even for the final conversion of Israel.

Recent scholarship has been reluctant to follow this line of reasoning, and has sought to contain Mark's Gospel within the inner life of one particular community, claiming that it was written 'from faith to faith'. It is true that the Gospel presupposes some acquaintance with, and even acceptance of, certain Christian presuppositions, about the rites of baptism and Eucharist, for example, or the meaning of the titles applied to Jesus. However, in dramatic performance it would have been able not only

to reinforce the faith of adherents, but also to attract those on the edge of the movement, who might be drawn further in. Mark's Gospel does not merely reflect community; it also has the power to create community (see further, Bauckham 1998). It is a handbook for itinerant storytelling and mission preaching.

MATTHEW

Matthew's Gospel quickly gained pre-eminence in the early Church; it is the one most frequently quoted by second-century fathers from Ignatius of Antioch (115 CE) onwards; it appears at the head of the emerging canon; it is credited (unlike Mark and Luke) with direct authorship by an apostle. According to Papias in the same passage as that quoted above, 'Matthew made an ordered arrangement of the sayings (or oracles, *logia*) in the Hebrew language, and each translated them as he was able.' While some scholars would still want to lend some credence to this testimony, referring it to possible Matthean authorship of a pre-Markan Aramaic gospel or of Q, most believe that it is mistaken. Matthew's Gospel, at any rate, was not written by the tax-collector apostle (so named at Matt. 9.9, but contrast Mark 2.14) who was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, for it was composed originally in Greek and is closely based on Mark (using 95 per cent of it, with many close verbal parallels). In effect, Matthew is a second edition of Mark, amplifying it with a fuller account of Jesus' birth and his teaching in parables and aphorisms, along with multiple quotations, allusions and typological patterns drawn from Jewish scripture. At the same time as presenting a more Jewish portrait of Christ as Son of David, New Moses (see Allison 1993) and Teacher of true righteousness, this Gospel also contains a strain of anti-Jewish polemic so virulent that it has even been doubted whether its author could himself have been a Jew (cf. e.g. Meier 1976: 14–21). This is the most puzzling aspect of Matthew, to which we shall return: its anti-Jewish, Christian Judaism.

The evangelist was almost certainly a Jewish Christian (Luz 1989: 79f.): he was able to translate Jewish scripture directly from the Hebrew to suit his own purposes (e.g. 8.17) and to organize the genealogy with which the book begins (1.2–17) into three series of 14, creating a subtle allusion to David (the sum of the Hebrew letters of whose name have that numerical value – the technique is known as *gematria*). From his orderly arrangement (Papias was correct in this observation, at least) of the teaching of Jesus into five substantial sermons, each ending with the same formula (see e.g. 7.28), it is possible that he was himself a Jewish teacher, who had become, as he says at 13.52, 'a scribe disciplined to the Kingdom of Heaven', and that one of his purposes in writing was pedagogical. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that Matthew has reduced the story of Jesus to exegesis and moral exhortation; the narrative framework – even if it is largely taken over from Mark – is still important to him, for it provides the context of forgiveness and grace in which the Gospel's severe ethical demands are to be situated.

Nevertheless, the theme of right conduct is almost as important for Matthew as that of right belief, and reveals his peculiar purpose in writing. There are repeated references to 'righteousness' and 'doing the will' of the Heavenly Father, some of which are probably editorial (e.g. 6.33; 7.21). On the one hand, Matthew constantly

attacks the scribes and Pharisees for failing to keep the Law. On the other hand, he warns members of his community that their salvation is in doubt unless they produce fruits worthy of repentance. There are therefore two sides to Matthew's rhetoric: an externally directed polemic and an internally directed exhortation. And these are closely interrelated – the moral superiority of Christians is to be the practical proof of their claim to have replaced Israel as the people of God.

In a pioneering redaction-critical study of Matthew (Bornkamm et al. 1963) Gerhard Barth argued that the internal threat was decisive for understanding the Gospel, and that those (7.22f.) who prophesy and work miracles 'in the name' but whose deeds are lawlessness (*anomia*) were antinomian libertine gnostics within the community (of the sort Paul may have confronted at Corinth). But 'lawlessness' is a practical and heedless (see 25.44) failure to act charitably; it is not a theoretical rejection of the rule of law. Even the Pharisees can be charged with the same fault (23.28). Furthermore, spiritual enthusiasts would be more likely to be rigorist in ethics (this is probably the case in Corinth) than libertine. Whatever its precise cause, the internal threat is real enough; and it gives rise to a whole series of 'division parables' separating wise from foolish (e.g. 7.24–7), faithful from unfaithful (e.g. 25.21, 26), rotten from productive disciples (e.g. 7.18).

If lawlessness has to be avoided, how much law is positively to be obeyed? Does Matthew's community insist on strict observance of Torah even for its Gentile members? This is a difficult question to answer. On the one hand, Matthew has taken over from Mark incidents where certain strict applications of sabbath law (12.1–13) are rejected, and yet, on the other, he implies that, even in a situation of life or death (24.20), it will still be rigidly observed. A key passage on this issue is 5.17–18: 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.' The introduction (v. 17) is probably redactional and indicates that what follows is intended as a response to the accusation that Christians fail to observe Torah. This is firmly denied; rather, Jesus came to 'fulfil' the law and the prophets in the minutest detail. But there is a deliberate ambiguity in this statement. For prophecy is 'fulfilled' (cf. the frequent fulfilment quotations) by enactment in messianic history (see 'until all things be accomplished', v. 18), while the Law is fulfilled by observance of its commands. For Matthew what is not 'fulfilled' in one way is 'fulfilled' in the other. Paul argues in a not dissimilar fashion when he says that outward circumcision is just a symbol of inward circumcision (Rom. 2.29), which is achieved through a 'circumcision not made with hands', namely baptism and new life in Christ (Col. 2.11). While Jewish Christians in Matthew's community probably continued with the practice, circumcision was not to be imposed on Gentile converts, for baptism was sufficient. It is surely no accident that this Gospel, unlike Luke's, passes over in silence the circumcision of Jesus in the birth story. The allegorization of obsolete laws was not of course peculiar to Matthew: post-70 CE Judaism had to do the same with the laws of sacrifice. And his apologetic against the accusation of law-breaking quickly turns into polemic against the accusers. The scribes and Pharisees are berated for hypocrisy, evasive casuistry, and superficial conformity disguising inward corruption.

Jewish Christian as it no doubt was, Matthew's church was nevertheless open to the mission to the Gentiles. The evidence on this issue is also admittedly somewhat confusing. Matthew has edited the Mission Charge to exclude explicitly from its scope Gentiles and Samaritans (10.5), and even seems to allow no time for more extensive mission before the coming of the Son of Man (10.23). Jesus was sent only to the 'lost sheep of the House of Israel' (10.6, cf. 15.24). Furthermore, Gentiles are attacked for their wordiness in prayer (6.7), and worldiness of life (6.32), in a way that implies that none belongs to the Church (cf. 18.17). However, greatly outweighing this evidence is the emphatic commission at the end of the book (28.16–20) to baptize and teach all the Gentile nations, and many earlier passages imply a similar openness (e.g. 12.18–21 – a Matthean fulfilment quotation, drawn from Isa. 42.1–4); indeed Gentiles are to replace the unbelieving Jews in the Kingdom (see 8.11–12; 21.43). Assuming that Matthew has not merely conflated conflicting traditions, his intention may have been to grant Israel the prerogative of an initially exclusive mission in order to highlight the grave consequences of her failure to respond to it, for the future judgement of the Son of Man had been exemplified historically in the fall of Jerusalem. Since 'true Jews' of whatever race are those who believe in Jesus as Christ, those who reject him become 'Gentiles' even if they are Jews. (For a similar polemical inversion of terms, see Phil. 3.2 where Paul calls Jewish opponents '[uncircumcised] dogs' and claims the title 'true circumcision' for Gentile Christians.)

Clearly, then, Matthew is not so much of a hardline Jewish Christian (if ever such existed in the early Church) as to exclude the possibility of salvation for Gentiles. But to determine more precisely what kind of Christian Judaism he advocated requires an investigation into the kind of Judaism he opposed.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 stimulated renewed interest in the Jewish background of Matthew's Gospel (Stendahl 1968). The Qumran community was a perfectionist and ascetic group who studied scripture in a scholastic way for its clues into the meaning of the last days; they were in dispute both with the Jerusalem priesthood and with those they called 'speakers of smooth things', possibly in reference to the Pharisees. In several respects, then, the similarities with this Gospel are striking: and it might be tempting to call Matthew's Judaism a Christian Essenism. But, though ascetic (cf. Matt. 19.12, on celibacy), there is no evidence that Matthew's community has withdrawn into monastic isolation, or that the book is the product of a school.

In his classic study of the setting of the Sermon on the Mount, W. D. Davies (1964) pointed to the parallels between Matthew's Gospel and early rabbinic Judaism as it attempted to reconstitute itself after the Jewish War, as a way of explaining the extreme tension between them. Like the Jewish Christians who had escaped Jerusalem before it fell (24.16) the scribal schools under the leadership of Rabbi Johannon ben Zakkai gained safe passage out of the besieged city from Vespasian, the Roman general, soon to be emperor. Neither group was ready to stay and die in defence of Jerusalem. No doubt each afterwards accused the other of bringing upon the nation that unmitigated disaster. For Matthew it was the rejection of the Messiah by the Jewish leadership that was the root cause (24.38–41; cf. 27.25) of this punishment from God. For rabbinic Judaism it was those who failed to observe

Torah correctly, such as the followers of the Nazarene, who were responsible for destroying the Temple, this time round just as before (Jer. 7.3f.).

In post-70 Judaism, the vacuum left by the cessation of the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem was filled by Torah and in particular by the 'acts of loving-kindness', namely, almsgiving, fasting and prayer. The proof-text favoured by Johannan to justify this transfer was Hosea 6.6, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' – a text that is one of Matthew's favourites too (9.13; 12.17); but whereas reconstituted Judaism tried to use public prayers, fasts and almsgiving to inculcate Jewish solidarity, Matthew's church stood apart from this movement, rejecting such display as hypocritical and insisting on an inward piety that would not be visibly divisive between its Jewish and Gentile members (6.1–18).

Observance of Torah in accordance with its interpretation by the scribes became the main identity marker for Jews in this period, and Matthew by no means dismisses the importance of scribal *halakah* (oral law). In chapter 23 Jesus begins a long tirade against the scribes and Pharisees by conceding that they 'sit on Moses' seat' (23.2) and possess the key of knowledge (cf. 21.13), though they fail to practise what they preach. It has sometimes been deduced from such statements that Matthean Jewish Christians were still 'within the fold' and able to benefit from scribal teaching by attendance at synagogue. But Stanton (1992) and others have argued cogently that they had decisively broken with the Jewish synagogues (called '*your* synagogues', e.g. 23.34). Matthew was aware that conditions that applied at the time Jesus was presumed to be delivering this speech no longer applied. His purpose in including the qualified endorsement of scribal authority is to provide an analogy for the Jewish Christian leadership in his mixed community, who like Peter held the power of the 'keys' and were entitled to legislate ('bind and loose', 16.19) for the true Israel, the Church (16.18). This is the only Gospel that uses the term church (*ekklesia*) and in slightly different senses in its two occurrences. At 16.18 it has a universal reference, of the whole company of believers looking back to their apostolic foundations ('on this rock I will build my Church') and forward to its eschatological victory ('the powers of death will not prevail against it'). In the other instance (18.17) it refers to the local gathering of Christians, exercising their corporate responsibility for church discipline. It would be a mistake to exaggerate this difference; for universal and local concepts of the church coexist in Paul's letters (Phil.3.6; cf. 4.15) and the authority of the community does not detract from the apostolic office (1 Cor. 5.4b), although the use of grand titles, like those of contemporary Judaism, 'Rabbi' and 'Abba', is frowned on (23.8–10).

Matthew's legitimization of Christ-centred Judaism as the true heir to God's promises to Israel produces a distinctive emphasis in his Christology, namely Jesus as Wisdom and Torah embodied. This is already implied in the birth narrative where Emmanuel is taken as a title for Jesus, 'God with us' (1.23). In the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (5.21ff.), the only one who could on his own authority ('I say unto you . . .') intensify and interiorize the Law of Moses must represent the eternal Torah of God. In a pivotal passage, 11.25–30, which momentarily reaches the lofty heights of Johannine Christology, Matthew represents Christ as the unique plenipotentary and revealer of the Father, who like Wisdom (Ecclus 24.19–24 and ch. 51) summons those who feel burdened by legal obligation to come and learn obedience

through the attractive beauty of righteousness. In a similar vein at 18.20 Matthew appears to adapt a Jewish proverb (Mishnah *Aboth* 3.2): 'If two sit together to discuss the Law, the Glory (*Shekhinah*) rests between them.' If so, it has been thoroughly christologized: it is meeting 'in the name of Christ', not studying Torah in the synagogue, that guarantees the presence of the true 'Glory' of God (which is Jesus himself). The invisible spiritual presence represented by these 'I' sayings is not so much the Jesus of history as the Risen Christ whose words conclude the Gospel (28.20): 'Lo, I am with you always.'

As we should have expected from a Gospel written more than a generation later than Jesus, there is evidence of the problem caused by the delay of the Parousia (see 25.5, 'the bridegroom is delayed'). And yet Matthew underscores the importance of continuing to believe in the imminence of judgement by ending each of his discourses on this note. The last, chapters 24–5, is particularly striking in this respect. Matthew takes over from Mark with little change the apocalyptic prophecy of Jerusalem's fall and the coming of the Son of Man, but then adds the parables of the Ten Maidens, the Talents and the vision of the last assize, commonly called the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In each case the emphasis is on producing a store of good works in this life. For Matthew the End may no longer be temporally so near, and since Christ is always present (28.20) there need be no anxiety in the wait for his return; but it is still morally pressing and inevitable. Eschatology has ceased to be a way of discerning the hand of God in the final stages of human history; it has become instead the ultimate sanction for ethical exhortation.

As an expanded second edition of Mark, Matthew inevitably shares some of the purposes of his main source. Its undiminished emphasis on mission implies that this book also is meant in some way to serve that end. But there is, at the same time, a heavier emphasis on the needs of the Christian community. The Gospel legitimates the Church's claim, against contemporary Jewish opponents, to be the true Israel, defined, not by Temple, land or Law, but by allegiance to God's Anointed; it also informs its audiences of their own responsibility to live up to that claim in practice. In other words, Matthew adds polemical and didactic elements to his kerygmatic narrative.

The exclusion of Jewish Christians from the synagogue would naturally have led to an increase in the use of Old Testament scripture in meetings of the Christian *ekklesia*. Its worship would no longer be supplementary to that of the synagogue but a rival replacement of it. That Matthew's Gospel is well suited to the liturgical needs of the Church has long been recognized (Kilpatrick 1946). While it is difficult to correlate precisely the sequence of themes in the Gospel with Jewish lectionary cycles of readings from the Law and Prophets (*pace* Goulder 1974), it is in general more than likely that Matthew's scroll was the first attempt we know of to meet the need for specifically Christian scripture.

LUKE

Luke's Gospel poses something of a problem in terms of genre, because of its second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. The interconnecting prefaces (Luke 1.1–4; Acts 1.1–2) show that the two books were meant in their final form to be read as one.

But it is possible that they were originally separate, and even that Acts was the first to be composed.

The Gospel follows closely the now familiar pattern of a kerygmatic, didactic and apologetic story about Jesus. But the Acts of the Apostles is unique in the New Testament, although it stimulated a number of imitations to be found among the later New Testament apocrypha (Schneemelcher 1991: 1). Its added title is misleading. According to the writer's own definition of an apostle (Acts 1.21f.), as an associate of Jesus' public ministry and eyewitness of his resurrection, several of the main characters, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas and Paul, are excluded from that category, and many of the twelve full apostles play no part in the story. Acts is more fittingly described as the Acts of the Holy Spirit guiding the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and in terms of genre as a kind of *travellers' tales*, satisfying the thirst for a good adventure story, new places and strange happenings.

Both volumes are clearly written from the perspective of Christian faith, but unusually the author can also view the 'Way' more objectively, as from the outside, as 'the sect of the Nazarenes' with Paul as its 'pestilent ring-leader' (Acts 24.5). Luke-Acts would perhaps not be altogether incomprehensible to sympathetic outsiders and, from the cosmopolitan scope of the story, the primarily intended Christian readership is unlikely to have been confined to a single location.

The preface to the Gospel is a rare example of an evangelist appearing momentarily 'in front of his text' and offering to explain its sources and purpose. It has for that reason attracted much scholarly attention and debate (see Alexander 1993). The preface is written in an elegant literary Greek, unmatched by anything that follows in the Gospel (though passages in the last part of Acts come close). The 'Septuagintal' style of the infancy narrative and the Synoptic style of the account of Jesus' ministry must be concessions by the author to Christian convention. He claims that 'many' have written before him – a permissible exaggeration in context, but apart from Mark we cannot be sure how many other texts he had to hand. It partly depends on the date we ascribe to this work. It must have been written after the capture of Jerusalem (21.20) and probably some time afterwards because it envisages a subsequent period, called 'the times of the Gentiles', during which Jerusalem will be trampled down (21.24). No certain quotation from the Gospel can be identified before Justin Martyr (c.150 CE) and nothing from Acts until even later. There are parallels between Luke and Matthew (the Q material) and also between Luke and John (especially in the resurrection appearances). The later the Gospel is dated the greater the likelihood that the evangelist knew Matthew's Gospel and used it, whether by direct consultation or from memory, along with other overlapping Synoptic-type traditions; and he may even have known the Gospel of John perhaps in an earlier version to the one we know. Its major themes like the revision of eschatology, the continuity but separation between Judaism and Christianity, and the relation between Church and State (see below) might be particularly apposite to conditions prevailing under Trajan (98–117 CE: see esp. Pliny, *Letters* 10.96, 97). The dating of Luke-Acts remains, however, an unsolved problem.

While the preface claims that the following work is based on the author's own exhaustive research, it admits that he was not himself an eyewitness of the events he reports. That is clearly so from his extensive use of sources in the Gospel. Is it

also true of Acts? Four passages in the second half of Acts are phrased in the first-person plural (16.10–17; 20.5–15; 21.1–18 and 27.1–28.16) as though the author was present with Paul on those occasions. Church tradition eventually (Irenaeus c.180) came to identify Paul's companion as 'Luke, the beloved physician' (Col. 4.14). But if this were so, it would be hard to explain the numerous errors of fact and interpretation in his portrait of Paul (Lentz 1993). Other explanations might be that the author was drawing on information from an eyewitness in these sections, or that the first-person plural is a literary fiction (it is used frequently in the Acts of John, see Schneemelcher 1991: 2). The fact that a minority of manuscripts have yet a fifth 'we' passage (at Acts 11.28) may even indicate that this phenomenon is secondary and has arisen early in the process of scribal transmission. To record personal reminiscences is unlikely to be one of Luke's main motives for writing: to understand these better, we need to look at the way the evangelist edits the sources available to him, and try to detect his theological and ideological stance.

On source-critical grounds, the basic motivation for the production of Luke's Gospel and the explanation of its resulting genre would be largely the same as those for Matthew's, the desire to expand Mark's narrative with more extensive use of the sayings of Jesus. The distinctive features of Luke, for example parables, birth story and resurrection appearances would be due to a Lukan special source, either already combined with Q (the Proto-Luke theory) or a peculiar stream of tradition to which the evangelist alone had access.

As redaction-criticism moved the focus of attention from sources to their editing, a different sort of answer to the question of genre began to emerge: Luke's Gospel as a theological schematization, under the form of storytelling, that provides a solution to the problem of the delay of the Parousia (Conzelmann 1960). According to this analysis, the expected End has been relegated to the distant, indefinite future. Its place has been filled with a salvation-historical scheme in three distinct periods: the time of the Old Testament prophets culminating and ending with John the Baptist: the 'middle of time' when the transcendent Kingdom of God comes near in the ministry and person of Jesus; and finally, decisively separated from it by the Ascension, the age of the Church, in which the Spirit functions as a substitute and compensation for the loss of Parousia hope. This theory is clearer and more cogent than Luke's actual text. There, imminent and delay strands are found side by side (Wilson 1973: 67–77). John the Baptist is both the end of the old age, but also – most obviously in the parallel infancy stories – the child of promise heralding the new. The Ascension is explicitly a pattern for what will happen (in reverse) at the Parousia (Acts 1.11) and the Spirit (given, according to Acts 2.17, 'in the last days') still retains its eschatological forward-looking function.

A more holistic reading of Luke that rejects too sharp a distinction between tradition and redaction (since the author by choosing to include traditions endorses them and makes them effectively redactional) may somewhat blur the contours of the theology, but it provides an even more interesting Lukan answer to the problem of Parousia delay. The evangelist was undoubtedly aware that, beginning with the twelve apostles themselves, there had been a false expectation of a speedy arrival of the Kingdom (19.11). He suggests that if they had paid closer attention to the Lord's teaching, they would have realized that first the gospel would have to be preached

to the ends of the earth and that would take some time (24.47). However, once Paul had preached in Rome, the outline of Acts implies, the essential programme of missionary expansion was completed. What happened afterwards is theologically less significant and is not to be recounted as part of sacred history.

Luke has subdivided the age of the Church into the recordable apostolic age and the subapostolic age, which is not worthy of inclusion in his record. The first, initial, period of delay for the sake of salvation was foreseen and intended; the second, post-apostolic, period of patient waiting and quiet perseverance in hope (18.1-8) could end any time now, for it would not interrupt the divine plan. Luke's concern is to demonstrate that the apostles faithfully imitated Christ, in mission and martyrdom, and authentically expounded the faith. He is not interested in setting up institutional structures for the long-term survival of the Church, like the authorization of successors to the apostles or the regularization of the rites of baptism and laying on of hands. The characteristic twofold shape of his work set the pattern of a twofold historical criterion for Christian truth, reflected in the New Testament canon itself: *Christ and Apostle* – *Gospel and Epistle*.

A further subsidiary answer to the problem is offered in a series of special Lukan passages, the Rich Fool (12.16-21), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16.19-31) and the Penitent Thief (23.40-3). While the end of history may or may not be in sight – we just do not know – the end of any individual's history (death, judgement, hell or paradise) is always in imminent prospect. These Lukan insights, the separation of apostolic from subapostolic history and the individualization of eschatology, were eventually to become the Church's official answer to the problem.

Luke's attitude towards political power may reveal another of his purposes. As in the earlier Gospels, the Jewish authorities are regularly portrayed as unscrupulous and hostile towards Jesus and as the instigators of persecution against his followers. But there are some odd exceptions: at 13.31, for example, some Pharisees attempt to warn Jesus of Herod's murderous intentions, and Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5.34) pleads for tolerance (5.38f.) towards the movement. The Jerusalem populace at the crucifixion retains a touching sympathy for him (23.48) which is entirely lacking in the other Gospels. In the trial before Pilate, the Roman governor three times affirms the innocence of the defendant and pleads for him to be released (23.16). But his pusillanimity is already an indictment of him, from a Roman administrative perspective, and the picture is confused further by the fact that Luke alone recalls the outrage of Pilate's slaughter of Galilean pilgrims (13.1). The evangelist may have muddled the incident with Pilate's notorious massacre of Samaritan worshippers that led to his downfall, but, uniquely in the Gospels, he here comes closer to the negative and probably more accurate portrait of Pilate that appears in Josephus (e.g. *Antiquities* 18.85). In Acts, Paul's status as a Roman citizen, once known, is respected by the authorities (Acts 16.37-9; 22.25-9) and is his means of escaping the clutches of Jewish opponents. But again, more ambiguous notes are sounded: for example, the procrastination of the governor Felix in dealing with Paul's case is explained by the suggestion that he was hoping for a bribe (24.26).

The once popular theory that Luke-Acts was intended as an 'apologia' addressed to a Roman governor, seeking to demonstrate the innocence, nobility and loyalty to the State of Jesus and his followers, in order to gain for Christianity the special

privileges enjoyed by the Jewish religion, has been increasingly questioned by recent scholarship (see e.g. Esler 1987: 201–19). 'Political legitimization', rather than direct apologetic, is no doubt a more accurate description of Luke's purpose. Faith gives one the courage to challenge corruption and stand up to oppression, but, for the time being at any rate, some way of living at peace with the pagan world is necessary.

If Luke is politically quietist, socially his message appears at first sight to be more radical. Warnings against the wealthy and the preference for voluntary poverty (see Johnson 1977) are pervasive themes in the Gospel, starting already in the infancy story (1.52f.). In the programmatic Nazareth sermon (4.18–21) Isaiah's prophecy of good news 'for the poor' is at last fulfilled. The Lukan beatitudes offer an unqualified blessing on the poor and plain woe to the rich (6.20, 24). The theme is especially prominent in two sections of the travel narrative (12.13–34; 16.1–31). The account of the early Jerusalem church sharing its possessions and having 'everything in common' (Acts 2.45; 4.34–7) is probably an idealization, but, whether practicable or not, the ideal is still cherished.

Yet, for all its emphasis on poverty, Luke's is not a Gospel directed only at the poor. Wealthy converts are welcome (Acts 17.4; 18.8). The rich may retain their capital, as long as they do so honestly (cf. Acts 5.3), and, imitating the good Samaritan (10.35), distribute alms (11.41; 12.33; 16.9) to those in need. The urban Christian congregations of Luke's day attracted converts not least by offering a security safety-net for the sick, the unemployed and widows (on the latter see 2.37; Acts 6.1). His warnings to rich and callous outsiders function as congratulations to the rich and generous insiders. Luke is anxious, like the writer of the Pastoral Epistles, to help those who may be poor but are at least respectable (1 Tim. 5.3–16). Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts is illuminating on the topic of social class. On his Jewish side, Paul is a distinguished graduate of Gamaliel's school, fluent in Hebrew and learned in the scriptures; on the Roman side, he is a citizen by birth, socially a match for those who presume to interrogate him. The Christian Way is one of voluntary poverty and charitable giving, but it is not uncivilized or uncouth!

The themes I have selected for particular comment, the timing of the End, politics and poverty, illuminate some of the extra motives behind a complex and multifaceted work. I might have discussed others – the apparent understatement, in order to avoid undue complexity and controversy, of Christology (Christ as Prophet, 7.16; 24.19) and Atonement (Christ as martyr 23.46; contrast Mark 15.34); the emphasis on the joy and power of the Spirit, the very positive characterization of women throughout. Each of these in its own way contributes to the attractiveness of Luke's presentation.

To return finally to the preface, Luke dedicates his work to a high-ranking Roman official who we can assume was already sympathetic to the movement. His name, as literary patron of the work, is used to commend it to other readers. The Gospel and Acts were evidently written in the format of two scrolls. Whether the author saw his second volume through to actual publication has been questioned (so Strange 1992: 178–85) but 'publication' was definitely intended. With Luke–Acts we reach a new stage in the sophistication of early Christian literature, that is books produced in multiple copies and sold for use in the homes of middle-class Christians who,

reading them, will be assured that their new faith is intellectually and socially respectable.

JOHN

At first sight, the Gospel according to John looks like the same kind of work as the Synoptics. It recounts Jesus' public career from his baptism onwards, as a mixture of teaching and healings, and it concentrates particularly on his final week in Jerusalem. But within this similarity of structure there are even more striking differences. Instead of a birth story, the book starts with a prose-poem on the Word of God in creation and redemption. The teaching takes a very different form from the pithy aphorisms and vivid parables of the Synoptic tradition; instead we find long drawn-out monologues and dialogues that circle around images and abstract concepts of universal application. The miracle stories bear closer comparison with Synoptic parallels (esp. 6.1–21), but they have been subordinated to Christology, as manifestations of the divine glory of Jesus (2.12) or as pegs on which to hang teaching or debates about his person. In place of the Synoptic parables of the Kingdom, we find christological allegories, Christ as living Bread, good Shepherd and true Vine. The Passion narrative begins already at chapter 12, midway through the book and is proportionately longer even than Mark's, but much of it is devoted to two farewell discourses (13–14 and 15–17) that are the Johannine equivalent of the Synoptic Apocalypse (Mark 13 and par.) and replace expectation of the future coming of the Son of Man with the presence of the Paraclete—Advocate to strengthen the disciples' faith as they undergo persecution in the world.

At certain points of difference, for example the three-year public career, or the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus in his absence (11.47–53) and the crucifixion the day before Passover (18.28), it is plausible to argue for John's superior historicity, but at most others the Synoptic account may be preferable. This leaves us with the problem of explaining how such a divergent tradition arose. Bultmann (1941) argued that the Fourth Gospel is a combination of three different genres: the Signs source, that is, a numbered collection of miracle stories (or *aretalogy*) portraying Jesus as a Hellenistic wonder-worker, which the evangelist is seeking to correct; a set of proto-gnostic revelation *discourses*, which the evangelist has Christianized to convey his understanding of eternal life available through Christ; and finally a more or less conventional *Passion narrative*, which counterbalances the idea of the divine revealer with an insistence on his mortality and therefore full humanity.

Although the reuse of sources probably does help to explain the present form of the Gospel (see Fortna 1988), Bultmann's theory, which involves accidental displacement at a later stage of composition, is not widely accepted today. Certainly a later editor, different from the main author, has made some minor corrections (e.g. 4.2) and at least one major addition (ch. 21), but how many other changes are due to him is difficult to say. The homogeneity of the style makes it likely that the Gospel grew out of the preaching activity of one remarkable early Christian prophet (Lindars 1972: 51–4). The stylistic similarity between the Gospel and the so-called First Epistle of John (which is not a letter but 'a written sermon') supports this suggestion. The same kind of summary statements about life, light, truth and love appear in

both, though in the Gospel these meditations are attached to sayings or deeds of Jesus, unlike the First Epistle, which ignores them. The warrant for this free development of the Jesus tradition is given in the Gospel itself in passages that speak of the Holy Spirit as Paraclete or Advocate. The eschatological promise of the Spirit's assistance to Christians on trial (see Mark 13.11) has been extended to include the present functions of remembering, expounding and defending the truths of faith (cf. e.g. 16.4–15, and see further Harvey 1976).

The identity of the prophet whose inspired words were accorded such authority is unknown. But the final editor, writing after his death, believed – perhaps mistakenly – that he had been an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry. At several points in the Gospel, a disciple is referred to as the 'one whom Jesus loved' or 'the other disciple'. He occupies the place closest to Jesus at the Last Supper (13.23; in the same relation with Jesus as he has with the Father, 1.18) and unlike the rest stands by him during his trial and crucifixion (19.26f.). He is the first to believe in the resurrection (20.8). At each of these points he is sharply contrasted with Peter. It may be that the negative portrait of the latter in the Synoptics has created an idealized 'true disciple'; or that the Johannine community is here projecting on to the narrative a representative of its own claim to have a more profound understanding of Christ than other Christian groups; or that a genuine historical figure (such as the apostle John, who is otherwise not mentioned in the Gospel) lies at the root of the Johannine tradition. Indeed, all three of these explanations may be partly correct.

The Fourth Gospel has often been interpreted in the same way as Paul's epistles, as a work of constructive theology: the main concern of this approach was to lay bare the essential structure of thought and the intellectual influences on the mind of the writer (Dodd 1953). If the Synoptics were all much earlier than John it would be possible to claim that they provided him with the raw material for his Gospel as a kind of meditation on the inner meaning of the Christ event in the full light of Easter faith. For a while in the mid-twentieth century this view was widely questioned (Dodd 1963) but it is coming back into popularity.

Certainly one of the main purposes of the Fourth Gospel is to expound the doctrine of Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus, still affirmed as central to the *kerygma* (pace Käsemann 1968), are set against a wider backdrop of the incarnation of the unique and pre-existent Son of God. It has often been assumed that such a lofty Christology must be a late development and could only have arisen after the Church had abandoned its Jewish roots and shaken off the constraints of monotheism. But the development is not that late: Paul's Christology, after all, is earlier and just as exalted (see Phil. 2.6–11). And there was much speculation about mediatorial figures in Jewish apocalyptic texts that veered close to the wind on the issue of a strict monotheism. It is not necessary to posit a Hellenistic background to account for John's theology.

Arguably, Christology is the only doctrine in the Fourth Gospel, since everything else is drawn within its ambit. Thus, salvation consists in replicating the Father–Son relationship in the mutual indwelling of Christ and believers. Creation and future redemption are brought together in the present, timeless moment of communion with Christ through faith and knowledge. The Church is made up of those who are rooted in Christ as true Vine or gathered around him as the good Shepherd. Morality

is reduced to his own new commandment to 'love each other as I have loved you' (13.34).

John's Gospel well illustrates the difficulty of using the story of the pre-Easter Jesus as the means of promoting faith in the post-Easter Christ. The evangelist is torn between fidelity to his storyline and full commitment to its central character. If the Gospel contains within it discrete homilies, then the message had to be included in each: it could not be reserved to the denouement of the plot as a whole. An unintended side-effect of this is that it gives the impression of docetism: intellectually at least, Jesus only 'appears' to be genuinely human; his head is in the clouds, communing with his Father.

However, a Gospel is not a treatise on Christology, even though John's encouraged a second-century development in that direction (see section 'Non-canonical Gospels and So-Called Gospels' below). And recent scholarship, in two rather different ways, has attempted to recover the importance of the narrative, in spite of the overpowering edifice of Johannine theology.

The literary artistry of the Fourth Evangelist is most apparent in his use of irony, misunderstanding and symbolism (Culpepper 1983). The dialogue with the Samaritan woman is a good example. The audience, who already know that Jesus is the true source of living water, appreciate the privilege of that knowledge in the face of the woman's literal-minded insistence that the well is deep and the water is stagnant. While the dialogue partners in the text remain at cross-purposes, the evangelist and his audience are drawn ever closer into a relationship of confidentiality and revelation.

The technique of double meaning is apparent also in the larger structures of the Gospel. To take one example, John places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of the ministry (2.13-22) and the raising of Lazarus in its place at the end (11.1-53). The earlier scene is then related to the Passion by the double meaning of the Psalm text: 'Zeal for thy house will consume me' (69.9). The disciples will only understand this later, we are told (2.22) when they realize that the assault on the money changers will result in Jesus' being 'consumed' in his trial and passion. But in John's rearrangement, the Lazarus episode becomes the immediate antecedent, within the narrative, of those events, and the revised chronology creates a deliberate irony: Jesus will be crucified because of the resurrection! (For further discussion of the narrative-criticism of John, see Stibbe 1992.) In terms of genre, the free use of the imagination brings this Gospel at certain points into the category of fiction, but it is fiction put to the service of theological insight.

The other approach to John's Gospel that has reassessed its significance as narrative was pioneered by J. L. Martyn (1979) in his study of chapter 9, the man born blind, as a dramatization of Johannine community history. The hostility of 'the Jews' in general towards Jesus, which is fully reciprocated (cf. 8.44), is even more emphatic than it is in Matthew. At 9.22 we are told that the Jews had already decided that anyone confessing Jesus as the Christ should be expelled from the synagogue: the motif recurs again at 12.42 and 16.2 — it was obviously important to the evangelist. The Jews try to manoeuvre the man, and even his parents, into confessing Christ, until finally, in frustration and offence at his cheek (v. 34), they excommunicate him anyway. The man born blind is one of the few secondary characters in John who has

his wits about him! Martyn proposed that this incident represents the retrojection into the ministry of Jesus of a recent bitter memory on the part of the Johannine Jewish Christians.

This approach was developed even further by Raymond Brown (1979) who found a whole sequence of events in community history dramatized through the narrative. The founding group in Palestine accepted Jesus as Davidic Messiah and attracted some of the followers of John the Baptist (1.35–7): the latter's role in the Gospel is to encourage others to join. The missionary work of this group among the Samaritans (ch. 4) catalysed the development of a higher Christology of Jesus as a heavenly 'prophet like Moses' (Deut. 18.15). The higher Christology led to controversy and finally breach with the synagogue and a move by Johannine Christians probably into Asia. There they were in competition with other forms of Christianity (represented by Peter in the text). On this showing, the Fourth Gospel tells two stories at the same time: that of Jesus and that of the community. In terms of genre, John would be a Gospel and an Acts, run together. Not all the elements of this comprehensive theory are equally plausible, but its central explanation of the vein of polemic against Judaism, amid the evidence that points to a strongly Jewish dimension in Johannine Christianity, is thoroughly convincing.

At the beginning and end of its evolution as a text, that is, its underlying kerygmatic story and its final editing, John is closer to the form of the Synoptics than it is in the middle of that process, during which explicit and powerful defences of Christological faith, against all detractors, have been incorporated into the Gospel itself: John is both text and interpretation in one. The 'layers' in the book are the result not only of its peculiar prehistory, but also of a deliberate layering technique: characters like the woman of Samaria and the man born blind function at three different levels, that of reported event, that of rhetorical foil and that of collective symbol of the community's history.

NON-CANONICAL GOSPELS AND SO-CALLED GOSPELS

Apart from the four Gospels that made it into the canon, there were several others that are lost to us except for odd citations in the early Church fathers. Origen and Jerome preserve, for example, half a dozen fragments of the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and a dozen or so from the *Gospel of the Nazaraeans* (Schneemelcher, 1991, 1: 154–78.). These Gospels, though plundered for the odd insight, were excluded as being too 'Jewish Christian' by a Christianity that was increasingly defining itself over against Judaism, and removing that middle category. There were also partial 'Gospels', especially legendary accounts of Jesus' birth, building on those of Matthew and Luke, and ascribed to James and Thomas (ibid., 1: 421–52); and the Passion narrative attributed to Peter (ibid., 1: 216–27). The discovery in 1945 of a Coptic gnostic library (see Robinson 1988) brought many more texts into discussion of the Gospel genre, but with little justification. What are called Gospels by the scribes who produced these translations are actually quite different in form. 'The Secret Sayings of the Living Jesus', which we know as the *Gospel of Thomas*, has no narrative to speak of: it is an amorphous collection of sayings, though quite early in its

original Greek form and may contain, among the dross, some valuable variations on Synoptic material. The *Gospel of Truth* and the *Gospel of Philip* are theological treatises; the *Gospel of the Egyptians* is an imaginative cosmogony; and the fragmentary *Gospel of Mary* (known from earlier papyrus discoveries) is a dialogue between Mary Magdalene and Peter on the gnostic claim to esoteric knowledge. While each is fascinating in itself, none of these texts can throw any light on the Gospel genre in the Bible.

CONCLUSION

The survey above of some of the more distinctive features of the individual Gospels has led us to question further the assumption that there is a generic similarity between them, as though their authors were all consciously engaged in the same activity of 'Gospel-writing'. Only retrospectively, when the four were collected together, did the word 'Gospel' take on that sense. Genre is as much a matter of purpose as of form, and the evangelists' purposes only partially overlap.

Mark's Gospel arose naturally out of oral storytelling as the means of evoking and confirming faith in Christ. It was intended for dramatic performance by itinerant preachers and it contains, for those with ears to hear, an answer to the problem of Christian mission, how to account for the temporary blindness and apparent rejection of the crucified and risen Messiah by his own people.

Matthew was not writing another Gospel of the same type as Mark. Its exhaustive use of his main source implies that this expanded edition was intended to replace it. The evangelist draws on more of the oral tradition of Jesus' teaching than Mark, and sharpens it in two directions, with attacks on Jewish opponents and warnings against backsliding Christians. While Mark, like Paul, still hoped that Israel would finally accept the good news, Matthew's community, violently excluded from the synagogue and constructing its own parallel but separate institutional structures, no longer envisages that possibility. The Gospel may itself be one such institution, the first example of Christian scripture.

Luke's two-volume work is different again. The Gospel is content to coexist with others that the author knows and from which he selects the choicest elements. His main theological purpose is to provide an answer to the problem of continuing history and the disappointment, so far, of hopes for the imminent return of Christ. Luke legitimates a Christ-centred form of Judaism but on different criteria from those used by Matthew, not with arguments about scripture and righteousness, but with the criteria, more familiar in the Graeco-Roman world, of honour, citizenship and compassion towards social inferiors. His work constitutes perhaps the first foray of the Christian movement into the world of publishing and book production.

John's Gospel in its present form is an amalgam of different elements. Its base is a kerygmatic narrative like Mark's but independent, into which have been woven some sermons and meditations in a mystical, poetic style and some sharp passages of polemic against the world and the Jews. These additions are, I suggest, the result of an exceptional kind of inspiration to which the main author of the book lays claim: the spirit of advocacy and prophecy that testifies to Jesus (cf. Rev. 19.10) in the continuing trial of faith. This was finally edited by someone who wanted to

preserve and promote the distinctive insights of the 'beloved disciple' in a Christian world that was starting to fill with books (21.25).

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