

The Fourfold Gospel



A Theological Reading
of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus

Francis Watson



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Preface

A “theological” reading of the canonical gospels is one that addresses questions they pose that relate to core concerns of Christian faith. Not all gospel interpretation is theological in this sense, and with good reason. The texts raise many questions that are tangential to Christian faith yet still significant in themselves. Nor is theological interpretation just one thing. It may be practiced in many different ways, of which renouncing the tools of critical scholarship for fear of secular contamination is perhaps the least promising.

The present book takes its cue from the fact that the four gospels are also a fourfold gospel. Each text is as it is only in relation to the others. The gospel texts retain their distinctiveness, yet they are coordinated with one another and do not exist outside that coordination. The plurality is a unity and the unity remains a plurality; one can therefore speak both of “four gospels” and of a singular “gospel according to . . .” in four different versions. None of the individual evangelists seem to have envisaged any such arrangement; indeed, only one of them (Mark) even uses the word “gospel” with any real enthusiasm. The fourfold gospel is the work not so much of the evangelists as of their early readers. It is the outcome of a process of gospel *reception*, and—since reception creatively reshapes what

is received—it is also an ongoing work of gospel *production*. In that work a number of well-known figures in the early church played their parts; the names of Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome will feature prominently in the pages that follow. But the work of reception was also carried forward by anonymous communities and individuals who read, prayed, lived, and cared about these books and so ensured that they continued in circulation and were available to meet new needs in new contexts. The shaping of the four texts occurred not only in their initial selection and coordination but also in the provision of authorial identities and biographies, in the development of a gospel symbolism, and in the scholarly analysis and interpretation of gospel similarities and differences. By these and other means, the early church *made sense* of its own core texts, in which the one story is told and retold in four different ways.

That is the framework in which this book offers its readings of gospel beginnings and endings. In an earlier and larger work entitled *Gospel Writing*, I developed a related argument in a form that remained accountable to the modern tradition of gospel scholarship even while criticizing its limitations. The canonical perspective of that book focused on excluded as well as included texts, highlighting the new situation created by an increasingly sharp canonical boundary. The present attempt at a theological reading focuses throughout on the texts within that boundary and on the theological questions they put to their interpreter, both individually and in their relations to one another. My main dialogue partners are often ancient authors rather than modern ones—not because I believe in “the superiority of precritical exegesis” but because the nature of this particular exercise seems to require it.

In the opening prolegomena, I attempt to show how the fourfold gospel came into existence—a second-century process with first-century roots. This is ground I have already covered in detail in *Gospel Writing*, and it is no more than prolegomena here because the main body of the book is concerned not with the origins of the fourfold gospel but with its form and significance. The four chapters of part 1

are devoted to the individual gospels, and their basic premise is the patristic assumption that a gospel's unique character comes most clearly to expression at its beginning. These chapters focus on the different gospel beginnings in order to characterize the gospels' distinct theological perspectives on the one they all confess as the Christ, the Son of God. The early church represented this difference of perspective by drawing on the symbolic resources of the books of Ezekiel and Revelation, and the symbolism of the four living creatures around the divine throne—the human, the lion, the calf, and the eagle—remains illuminating. These plural perspectives are not only different but also complementary; that, at least, is how they are intended to be read, and it is how they are read here. This complementarity is to be found on the theological rather than the historical plane, for the evangelists are more concerned to bring out the fundamental significance of Jesus' life than to provide precise information about factual detail. The gospels are portraits, not entries in a biographical dictionary.

The two central chapters of part 2 (chaps. 6 and 7) focus on gospel endings, and they present readings of episodes from the combined passion narratives—the triumphal entry, Gethsemane, the crucifixion, the empty tomb—in which the same story is told and retold by all four evangelists. The fourfold gospel testimony to these events is analyzed with the help of the so-called canon tables devised by Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century, which not only installed an effective cross-referencing system within premodern gospel books but also classified the different ways in which gospels relate to one another. Eusebius's canon tables remain one of the most impressive achievements of early Christian scholarship, although in recent times they have been little appreciated and poorly understood. A preliminary chapter (chap. 5) is therefore devoted to Eusebius's system, which, by displaying the ties that bind the gospels together, created a rationale for including the four separate gospels within the covers of a single volume. That is how the fourfold gospel established itself as a fourfold gospel *book*.

The gospel texts converge at their endings, but the question remains as to how these texts converge on the truth itself—the truth

about Jesus, which, from a Christian standpoint, also entails definitive truth about God, the world, and human existence in the world and before God. The question of truth is everywhere implicit, even when the discussion seems focused only on texts, but it becomes explicit when—in the ancient world, as today—the gospel is said to be fundamentally *untrue* and, as such, detrimental to human well-being. In the final chapter of this book (chap. 8), these claims provide an occasion for historically informed theological reflections on the nature of gospel truth.

I should emphasize that this book offers no more than a *reading* of the fourfold gospel. It does not seek to be prescriptive. There is no claim to the effect that Matthew’s opening genealogy is the one and only key to understanding his gospel, or that future gospel scholarship should base itself on Eusebius’s canon tables. Such claims would be unwarranted and indeed absurd. The basic observation that the fourfold gospel exists as a singular entity in its own right might lead in any number of different directions.



I must express my thanks to Matthew Crawford, my outstanding postdoctoral research assistant, for his many exceptional contributions to our joint research project, “The Fourfold Gospel and Its Rivals,” under whose auspices this book has been written, and also to the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding it, and him. In the early summer of 2014, during a period of research leave at the Free University, Amsterdam, I benefited greatly from the comments of four sharp-eyed and articulate undergraduate readers with whom I met regularly to discuss drafts of the first four chapters: Ruben van de Belt, Martine van der Herberg, André Poortman, and Mirjam Verschoof. My warmest thanks to them and to my always-genial host, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, who did so much to make my stay in Amsterdam memorable. Drafts of “The Making of a Fourfold Gospel” were presented to graduate seminars in Amsterdam, Cambridge, Durham, and St. Andrews, and in each case significant

improvements resulted. My thanks to all who participated in these events.

In September 2014 I was privileged to deliver a series of five lectures based on the first half of this book at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. It was a remarkable experience to speak about the gospels in an Asian context where Christianity is still a relatively new phenomenon and where its rapid expansion recalls the church of the second and third centuries and contrasts with the situation in the West. I would like to thank my former student Leonard Wee, Principal Nguei Foong Nghian, and the many other faculty, students, and friends of the college who showed such extraordinary kindness and hospitality at that time. Taiwan and Charles Leung deserve a special mention here. Introducing a class of first-year students to the use of a gospel synopsis and the study of gospel parallels was a particularly memorable experience.

In writing this book I have often found myself returning to themes addressed in PhD theses I supervised during my time at the University of Aberdeen from 1999 to 2007. Thanks are due in particular to Joel Kennedy, Suresh Vemulapalli, Richard Cornell, Tom Holsinger Friesen, David Nienhuis, and Jake Andrews for many instructive conversations on (respectively) the Matthean genealogy, the synoptic “way of the Lord” motif, the Gospel of John in patristic christological debates, and Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Augustine.

The book is dedicated to my parents, with gratitude and affection, in the hope that it meets their long-standing request for a shorter book accessible to nonspecialist readers.

Francis Watson
Durham, England
March 19, 2015

Abbreviations

ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i>
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
FC	Fathers of the Church
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte
ICC	International Critical Commentary
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i>
LXX	Septuagint
NA ²⁸	Nestle-Aland, <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> . 28th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012.
NKZ	<i>Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift</i>
NPNF ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1
NPNF ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
ThTo	<i>Theology Today</i>
WA	<i>Weimarer Ausgabe (D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe)</i>
WA DB	<i>Weimarer Ausgabe, Deutsche Bibel</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Prolegomena: The Making of a Fourfold Gospel

How many gospels are there? What are the names of the evangelists? It is hard to think of any more elementary items of biblical knowledge. Even at a time of declining biblical literacy, there are still many—of different ages and backgrounds, with or without links to churches—who could answer such questions with confidence. There are four gospels. The evangelists' names are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

These are, of course, the right answers. Or are they? Might they be, if not wrong, at least misleading? These answers need some refining. There are four gospels *in the New Testament*, although other gospels or gospel-like texts were in circulation in the early church. It is *tradition* that names the canonical evangelists as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and places their texts in what is supposed to be chronological order. The texts themselves are anonymous, and their authors or editors show little inclination to make their identities known.

If the answers need refining, so too do the questions, with their taken-for-granted references to “gospels” and “evangelists,” or gospel writers. The texts are universally known as “gospels,” but this plural term may not be appropriate. One of them, Mark, refers to

itself as “the Gospel of Jesus Christ,”¹ which seems not to leave room for further gospels. In two of the others, Luke and John, the term is never used at all. The singular “gospel” originally referred to the Christian message—good news delivered in person, not in writing. The apostle Paul once pronounced a double anathema on anyone (even an angel) who tried to supplement the one true gospel with another.² What would Paul have made of the suggestion that there are, or should be, four gospels?

It seems that our initial naive questions and answers must be reformulated. How should we view the relationship between the four canonical gospels and gospel literature outside the New Testament? Within the New Testament, are we dealing with four distinct texts or with a single text in different versions? How did these texts or versions become associated with the term “gospel” and with named evangelists? Why are *these* four texts collected together in preference to other texts or formats? Answering these questions will provide us with an account of how the four-gospel collection was constructed. This fourfold gospel did not just happen. It did not assemble itself automatically when the Fourth Evangelist laid down his pen. It is a collective work fashioned by the evangelists’ early readers.

More succinctly put, our preliminary questions about gospels and gospel writers are these: (1) More than four? (2) Fewer than four? (3) Why “gospel”? (4) Why the evangelists’ names? (5) Why these four?

More Than Four?

The four-gospel collection is the foundation stone of the New Testament collection, but that does not mean that only four gospels were written. Some of the additional gospels have always been well known, appreciated by some though criticized by others. These are conventionally placed in the category of “apocryphal” gospels, and they are typically expansions of the beginnings or endings of the

1. Mark 1:1.
2. Gal. 1:8–9.

canonical gospel narratives. The *Protevangelium of James* relates the birth and upbringing of Mary as the prelude to a fuller account of the circumstances of Jesus' birth, elaborating material drawn from Matthew and Luke. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* contains entertaining stories about the child Jesus' not-always-benevolent use of his magical powers. The *Gospel of Nicodemus* offers the reader further information about Jesus' trial before Pilate, his death, his descent into hell, and his enemies' reaction to his resurrection. The label "apocryphal" implies that these texts are essentially different from the canonical gospels, that they were written considerably later, and that they lack credibility and authority. Presumably those who used these texts thought more highly of them than that.

More significant questions arise from the many papyrus fragments of Greek gospel books recovered from the sands of Egypt since the late nineteenth century. Most of these fragments are from volumes containing a single gospel, and the figures for each gospel can give a rough indication as to popularity and influence over a period stretching from the second century to the seventh. The two gospels attributed to apostles are far ahead of the others, with (at the last count) twenty-six copies of John attested and twenty-two of Matthew. Luke comes in third place with eight copies, but Mark (a single copy) is overtaken by the noncanonical *Gospel of Thomas* (three copies), the *Gospel of Peter* (three), and the *Gospel of Mary* (two).³ Other fragments are from unknown gospels—"unknown" in the sense that no reference to their supposed authors has survived. Of these, the most important is the *Egerton Gospel*, named after the bequest from which the British Museum acquired its papyrus remains in 1934. If the figures are restricted to papyri dated to the second and third centuries, the proportions are about the same: John, fifteen copies; Matthew, nine; Luke, four; *Thomas*, three; *Mary*, two; *Peter*, two; *Egerton*, one; and Mark, zero. Even in later centuries, copies of

3. The figures for the canonical texts are drawn from the listings of New Testament papyri in NA²⁸, 792–99. On the use of the codex format in these papyri, see esp. L. Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 43–93.

Peter, *Thomas*, and *Mary* continued to be produced in Greek or in Coptic translation.⁴ On the basis of these figures, owners of gospel texts were as likely to possess a noncanonical gospel as a copy of Luke or Mark.

To use all available gospel texts was not necessarily to cast oneself in the role of a rebel or a heretic. This is clear from the work of Clement of Alexandria, writing in the late second and early third centuries. Clement's logic seems to be as follows.⁵ Sayings of Jesus may appear in gospel texts outside the canonical four and yet give every appearance of authenticity. The canonical texts themselves make no claim to completeness; on the contrary, "Jesus did many other signs before his disciples that are not written in this book."⁶ If other books contain authentic tradition about what Jesus did or said, then the literary context that preserved it is of secondary importance. It hardly matters whether it was Matthew or Thomas who wrote down a saying of Jesus; the saying and the speaker are more important than the scribe. To an Egyptian Christian of the third or the sixth century, the answer to the question "How many gospels?" might not have been straightforward. He or she would be aware that just four gospels were authorized for reading in church, and yet be convinced that authentic and valuable gospel literature was to be found beyond the church's limit.

That was also the view of Christians in Rhossus, a coastal town in Roman Cilicia located close to the modern border between Turkey and Syria. At some point around the beginning of the third century, Christians there petitioned Bishop Serapion of nearby Antioch for permission to use the noncanonical *Gospel of Peter* in their public worship. (A passion-and-resurrection narrative from this text was discovered in 1886; other early evidence seems to confirm that it was

4. For details of manuscript evidence for the noncanonical texts, see T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas, *Das Petrus-evangelium*, 25–31, 55–63; S. Gathercole, *Gospel of Thomas*, 3–13; C. Tuckett, *Gospel of Mary*, 5–10; T. J. Kraus, M. J. Kruger, and T. Nicklas, *Gospel Fragments*, 11–22 (Egerton).

5. For full discussion, see F. Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 418–36.

6. John 20:30; cf. 21:25.

a full-length gospel of similar scope to Matthew in which “Peter” speaks in the first person singular.)⁷ Serapion, bishop of one of the major sees of the eastern Mediterranean and a determined opponent of heresy, had not read this text. Yet he was persuaded by the petitioners’ arguments and duly gave them permission to use it. A little later, having become better acquainted with the *Gospel of Peter*, he wrote to the Rhossian Christians in some embarrassment, listing passages he now believed to have been added by heretics. Yet he does not deny the basic soundness of the Petrine gospel. If heretical additions are listed, the appropriate response would simply be to delete them or to make new copies that omit them—not to give up on this gospel as a whole. At this time there was still nothing inherently wrongheaded about the Rhossian adoption of a further gospel, even for an impeccably orthodox bishop. Nevertheless, the request for permission to use it also implies an established usage of other texts. We may assume (though we cannot be sure) that no one ever wrote to Serapion for permission to use Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

If the New Testament contains four gospels, that does not mean that only four gospels were written. It means that four gospels were selected from a wider range of gospel literature to serve as a basis for the church’s preaching, teaching, and worship. The four-gospel collection is the work not just of individual evangelists but of the church.⁸

Fewer Than Four?

The texts we know as “Matthew,” “Mark,” and “Luke” have their own distinct identities. Yet Matthew incorporates most of the contents of Mark into his own more comprehensive framework. The same is true of Luke, who also shares much of the material that Matthew adds to

7. The relevant texts are collected in Kraus and Nicklas, *Das Petrusevangelium*. An excerpt from Serapion’s letter to the church at Rhossus is preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.12.1–6.

8. Thus, from a purely historical point of view, the gospels “are inseparable from the space they have inhabited, and continue to inhabit, as the canonical Scripture of the Christian church” (M. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 77).

Mark, probably deriving it from Matthew himself.⁹ Mark's narrative spans the events from Jesus' baptism and temptation through his Galilean ministry, his transfiguration, and his journey to Jerusalem to the drama of Good Friday and Easter morning. Along the way there are healings, exorcisms and other miraculous events, parables and instruction for the crowds or disciples, and debates with opponents in both Galilee and Jerusalem. Matthew, writing later, retains this basic framework but supplements it, inserting major new blocks of material at various points in the Markan outline. This evangelist wants to provide a more comprehensive account than his predecessor. He may perhaps have expected his text to be used alongside Mark's, a second gospel to complement the first. More likely he expects to *replace* Mark. His is not an independent work with himself as sole author. Matthew is not only an author; he is also an editor who takes upon himself the task of preparing an enlarged and improved second edition of the earlier gospel text. So the questions arise: Do we have here two gospels, or two editions of a single gospel? Does Luke then add a third edition? Are the evangelists more like individual authors or anonymous editors?

Mark's gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, about whom a surprising amount of information is compressed into a few verses. We read of the prophetic foretelling of his ministry, his call to repentance and baptism, even his unusual clothing and diet. Jesus is introduced with no preparation at all: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."¹⁰ Immediately the heavens open, the dove descends, and the divine voice acknowledges Jesus as "my beloved Son."¹¹ It is all very sudden; no explanation is given as to why this particular candidate for baptism is singled out like this. So Matthew supplies us with the background and context that make sense of the event that launches Jesus' ministry. A genealogy is provided, and a miraculous conception signals a unique

9. As argued persuasively by M. Goodacre, *Case against Q*.

10. Mark 1:9.

11. Mark 1:10–11.

divine involvement in this particular human life from its very beginning. Even the fact, noted by Mark, that Jesus was “from Nazareth of Galilee” is not an accident. Matthew devotes much of his second chapter to showing how a Messiah born in Bethlehem nevertheless grew up in Nazareth, as foretold in prophetic scriptures.

Mark’s abrupt beginning is matched by an equally abrupt ending. Women disciples of Jesus visit his tomb early on Easter morning but flee in terror when they find it occupied not by Jesus’ corpse but by a mysterious young man in white who announces his resurrection.¹² One second-century reader found this conclusion so unsatisfactory that he added a series of postresurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, two disciples on the road, and the Eleven.¹³ The author of this “Longer Ending” was not the only early reader to worry about Mark’s inconclusive conclusion. It had already been thoroughly rewritten by Matthew, who makes the young man in white unambiguously an angel and adds a guard before telling how Jesus appeared to the women on their way back from the tomb and to the eleven male disciples on a Galilean mountaintop.¹⁴

So the gospel narrative as conceived by Mark is provided with a new beginning and a new ending, and there are further interventions along the way. After the Markan Jesus calls his first four disciples, he enters the Capernaum synagogue and impresses the congregation with his teaching—“for he taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes.”¹⁵ Mark tells us nothing here about the content of Jesus’ teaching, preferring to focus instead on a dramatic exorcism performed on the same occasion. Like Mark, Matthew tells of the call of the first disciples and reports the favorable audience reaction to Jesus’ authoritative teaching.¹⁶ In both cases the wording is unusually similar. Yet in Matthew the scene of the teaching is shifted from a synagogue to a mountaintop, and the exorcism story is replaced by

12. Mark 16:1–8.

13. Mark 16:9–20.

14. Matt. 28:1–20.

15. Mark 1:22.

16. Matt. 4:18–22; 7:28–29.

an elaborate and artfully structured presentation of the authoritative teaching itself, the so-called Sermon on the Mount.¹⁷

Matthew's editorial procedure is to add blocks of new material to the beginning and ending of Mark and at several points in between. Luke's editing of Mark is broadly similar. Following the sequence of Mark's narrative just as Matthew does, he too adds a birth story and a genealogy to the beginning and postresurrection appearance stories to the ending. He too inserts larger or smaller blocks of additional material—teaching or narrative or a combination of the two. At each point of similarity with Matthew, a contrast may also be noted. For Matthew, Joseph is the central figure of the birth stories; for Luke, it is Mary. Matthew traces Jesus' descent from Abraham and David through Solomon and the kings of Judah, while Luke proceeds in the opposite direction through another son of David back beyond Abraham to Adam.¹⁸ Matthew sets the great Sermon on a mountain, while Luke's reduced version is preached on a plain.¹⁹ For Matthew, the disciples' meeting with the risen Lord takes place in Galilee; for Luke, it occurs in Jerusalem.²⁰ The similarities and contrasts can hardly be coincidental. Although many scholars still think otherwise, it is difficult to believe that Luke writes without knowledge of Matthew.²¹ Does he seek to complement Matthew, or does he regard Matthew as a rival? In his preface he contrasts predecessors who have "attempted" to write a faithful account with his own work, which (unlike theirs, it seems) is carefully and thoroughly researched.²² Here at last is the book that better-educated Christians have awaited so long—a reliable and accurate account of the life and ministry of Jesus!

Have Matthew and Luke produced new editions of older material, perhaps even in competition with each other? Does either of them envisage any future for Mark as an independent work? Celsus, an

17. Matt. 5:1–7:27.

18. Luke 3:23–38.

19. Matt. 5:1; Luke 6:17.

20. Matt. 28:16; Luke 24:33–36.

21. See F. Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 117–55.

22. Luke 1:1–4.

early critic of Christianity, touches on just this point, and there is insight in his comment despite its hostile tone. According to Celsus, the Christians “have revised the gospel in its first written form, three, four, or many times, and have remodeled it so as to be able to refute objections.”²³ For this author, Christians produced not multiple gospels but multiple editions of a single original gospel. They did so to preempt the objections to which earlier versions gave rise. As a description of Matthew’s procedure vis-à-vis Mark or Luke’s vis-à-vis Matthew, Celsus’s statement seems to be on target.

However these texts were originally related, all that changes when they are set alongside one another within the fourfold canonical collection. The church’s decision to acknowledge four gospels does not simply *recognize* them for what they are; it also *bestows* on each of them its own independent status and validity. If the Gospel of Mark was earlier seen as a preliminary attempt at gospel writing, destined to be absorbed into later and more sophisticated accounts, the collective canonical decision preserves it as a work in its own right. If Luke was once the critic of Matthew, their respective versions of the gospel story now stand side by side. Competing and divergent editions of the same text have become the three “synoptic gospels.”

Why “Gospel”?

The term “gospel” occurs sixty times in the Pauline letter collection, although for Paul the gospel is associated with speech rather than writing. The gospel is spoken, preached, proclaimed, evangelized—different terms are used to make the same point.²⁴ This speech is preceded by written texts in the form of the Scriptures, an essential resource for interpreting the gospel events. It may also be followed by a written text in the form of a Pauline letter that will remind its

23. Quoted in Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.27.

24. The gospel is a message that is spoken (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:2), preached (*kērussēin*: Gal. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:9), proclaimed (*kataggellein*: 1 Cor. 9:14), and evangelized (*euangelizesthai*: 1 Cor. 9:18; 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7; Gal. 1:11); thus it is also heard (Gal. 3:2, 5; cf. Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5) and received (1 Cor. 15:1).

readers of the message once heard and believed. But the gospel itself is not written. It is an interpersonal *event*, a communication in which one speaks and others hear, occurring at a particular time and place. The gospel for Paul is “the gospel of Christ,”²⁵ for it is Christ who has sent him to preach it, Christ who speaks through it, and Christ who is its content. More specifically, the gospel tells how Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day, his death underlined by his burial and his resurrection confirmed by his appearing to his followers.²⁶ A written text that narrates this same train of events is certainly *gospel-like*, but the extension of the term “gospel” into the sphere of writing still needs an explanation.

That explanation may be found in the opening words of the earliest surviving gospel: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”²⁷ Here, “the Gospel of Jesus Christ” seems to be the original title for the whole of this text—a title later supplanted by the more familiar “Gospel according to Mark.”

Mark shares the early view of the gospel as an orally delivered message. At the start of Jesus’ ministry, Mark has him returning to Galilee and “proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near—repent and believe the gospel!’”²⁸ The reference to fulfilled time draws attention to an event already encroaching on the present, the dawning of the kingdom of God. If the content of the gospel is the kingdom of God, and if Mark’s text is itself gospel, then the two senses of “gospel” must converge: the kingdom of God is what happens in and through Jesus, as narrated by Mark. Of course, Jesus cannot proclaim his own death and resurrection at the start of his ministry, but he can announce a decisive divine intervention whose content is yet to be unveiled.

Elsewhere Mark uses the term “gospel” to refer to the message preached by the apostles after Jesus’ departure. He has Jesus speak

25. Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 3:2; cf. 2 Thess. 1:8.

26. 1 Cor. 15:3–9.

27. Mark 1:1.

28. Mark 1:14–15.

of those who leave their families and possessions or lose their lives “for my sake and for the sake of the gospel.”²⁹ Before the end comes, “the gospel must first be preached in all nations.”³⁰ The story of the woman who anointed Jesus’ head with precious ointment will be retold “wherever the gospel is preached, in all the world.”³¹ In the Longer Ending, the risen Lord sends the eleven apostles “into all the world to preach the gospel to the whole creation.”³² At the beginning of Mark’s narrative, Jesus preaches the gospel in Galilee; as it draws toward its close, a future is envisaged in which the gospel is preached to all nations, in all the world, and to the whole creation. That is the context in which the evangelist applies the term “gospel” to his own written text, as he announces “the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”³³ The underlying idea is that his text is the embodiment and continuation of the original apostolic preaching. In writing the gospel, the evangelist ensures that the apostolic testimony is extended to future generations.

Mark was surely not the first to commit to writing sayings and actions attributed to Jesus. In putting this text into something like its present form, he will have had no shortage of earlier written material on which to draw. His own interventions in this earlier material can be clearly identified at many points, and they include the passages where the term “gospel” is highlighted. A traditional saying has Jesus speak of the need for self-sacrifice “for my sake,” and Matthew and Luke restore it to its earlier form. It is Mark who has added “and for the sake of the gospel.”³⁴ When Mark entitles his own text “gospel,” later evangelists again decline to follow him. Matthew and John refer to their texts not as a gospel but simply as a “book” (*biblos* in Matt. 1:1, perhaps referring only to the genealogy; *biblion* in John 20:30; cf. 21:25). Luke offers his readers a well-structured sequential “account”

29. Mark 8:35; 10:29.

30. Mark 13:10.

31. Mark 14:9.

32. Mark 16:15.

33. Mark 1:1.

34. Mark 8:35; cf. Matt. 16:25; Luke 9:24.

or “narrative” (*diēgēsis*, Luke 1:1; cf. v. 3). Only Mark seems to think that a book of this type should be described as “gospel.”

By the mid-second century, Justin Martyr reports that texts that he prefers to describe as “Memoirs of the Apostles” are generally known as “gospels,” *euaggelia*.³⁵ Several of these books were in use in Justin’s Roman environment, most prominently Matthew and Luke, and some common term was needed that acknowledged both their similarity and their distinctiveness. No one seems to have thought to describe the gospels as “Lives of Jesus,” though there are many points of contact with ancient biographies whose titles follow a “Life of . . .” format.³⁶ Justin’s polysyllabic proposal (*Apomnēmoneumata*, “Memoirs”) was never likely to become popular. And so these four “memoirs” or “lives” have been *gospels* ever since.

Why the Evangelists’ Names?

Later gospel books like to incorporate their supposed authors’ names within their texts. At the end of the main surviving section of the *Gospel of Peter*, we read: “I, Simon Peter, and my brother Andrew took our nets and went to the sea.”³⁷ The *Gospel of Thomas* claims to present its readers with “the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.”³⁸ A concern with authorship is already perceptible in two of the canonical gospels. In the Longer Ending of John (John 21, a late addition), it is said that the anonymous “disciple whom Jesus loved” is responsible not just for the testimony underlying the gospel but also for writing it.³⁹ The witness has become an author; tradition will shortly name that author as “John.” In the Lukan preface, the evangelist speaks in the first person singular: “It seemed good to me also.” This authorial

35. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 66.3.

36. That the gospels are typical examples of Greco-Roman biographies has been argued by R. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*

37. *Gospel of Peter* 14:60.

38. *Gospel of Thomas*, prologue.

39. John 21:24.

self-introduction seems modest enough when compared to the one found in a contemporary Jewish work that the evangelist may have known: “I, Josephus son of Matthias, a Hebrew by race, a native of Jerusalem and a priest.”⁴⁰ The evangelist mentions only the name of the dedicatee, Theophilus, and not his own. Yet even this discreet authorial appearance is unprecedented in the older gospel tradition represented by Mark and Matthew. The first individual mentioned by these evangelists is not themselves but “Jesus Christ the Son of God,”⁴¹ “Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”⁴² No authorial persona is allowed to distract attention from him; gospel writing must be anonymous.⁴³

This tradition of anonymity is echoed by the gospels’ early readers. The text known as the *Didache* (or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, to give it its full title) may have been compiled only a decade or two after the Gospel of Matthew, with which it has close ties. As he instructs his readers in the name of the twelve apostles, the author echoes Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount:

Do not pray like the hypocrites, but, as the Lord commanded *in his gospel*, pray like this: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be thy name . . .⁴⁴

Your prayers and alms and all your acts, perform just as you have them *in the gospel of our Lord*.⁴⁵

The “gospel” here is clearly a written text rather than an oral tradition, and that written text is equally clearly Matthew.⁴⁶ Or rather, it is the text we call “Matthew” but which the Didachist knows as “The Gospel of Our Lord,” the authoritative text to which “The Teaching of

40. *Jewish War* 1.1.

41. Mark 1:1.

42. Matt. 1:1.

43. The original anonymous circulation of the gospels is, however, flatly denied by M. Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 48–56.

44. *Didache* 8.2.

45. *Didache* 15.4.

46. Cf. Matt. 6:1–15.

the Twelve Apostles” must defer. If the Lord commanded something, then it is unimportant to know the name of the scribe who recorded it.

A few decades after the *Didache*, Justin Martyr composed a dialogue between himself and a possibly fictional non-Christian Jew by the name of Trypho. Trypho is presented in a fairly positive light, although his interventions are all too brief in comparison to the verbose Justin character. At one point Trypho indicates a previous interest in Christian faith:

I regard your rules of conduct *in the so-called “gospel”* as so wonderful and great that I suppose no one is capable of keeping them; for I have read them with care.⁴⁷

Trypho does not specify which rules of conduct he has in mind, but in another context Justin presents a selection of them drawn mainly from the Sermon on the Mount and parallel material elsewhere in Matthew or in Luke.⁴⁸ Trypho claims to have engaged with a Christian text, not just an oral tradition, and the text has a title. That title is simply “Gospel.” Justin himself can use the same title:

This saying is written *in the gospel*: “All things are given to me by the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son, nor the Son but the Father and those to whom the Son reveals him.”⁴⁹

The wording differs slightly from the canonical originals, and the saying may have been drawn from either Matthew 11:27 or Luke 10:22 or both. For Justin, however, the saying comes *not* from “Matthew” or “Luke” but from “the gospel.” Applied to the Gospel of Matthew in the *Didache*, the term “gospel” may by that point have extended its range to include supplementary gospel material not found in Matthew. To judge from his other citations of Jesus’ sayings, Justin’s “gospel” is essentially Matthew enhanced by Luke, a “Matthew-plus.” (Mark

47. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 10.2.

48. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 15–17.

49. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100.1.

and John are barely in evidence, although Justin is probably aware of them, as he is also probably aware of the *Gospel of Peter*.) Yet no individual named authors are in view. At this stage the gospel has its source in the collective apostolic testimony, not in the distinctive perspective of any specific individuals.

So why were individual names attached to these collective apostolic gospel books, with their exclusive focus on the Lord's own words and deeds? What makes the names necessary is the construction of the canonical boundary. A line is drawn around certain texts that definitively separates them from other similar texts. To draw the line at all, the texts it encloses must be identifiable. That is why the first full set of evangelists' names—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—appears at precisely the moment when it is first claimed that the church must acknowledge just four gospels. The key figure here is Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons. Around 180 CE, Irenaeus wrote:

Matthew, among the Hebrews and in their own language, produced a written account of the gospel, while Peter and Paul were in Rome evangelizing and founding the church. After their departure Mark also, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down to us in written form what was preached by Peter. And Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by him. Then John the disciple of the Lord, who reclined upon his breast, published a gospel while living in Ephesus in Asia.⁵⁰

With four named evangelists securely installed, Irenaeus can claim that “it is not possible for the gospels to be either more or fewer in number than they are,” and that Christ the divine Word has bestowed on his church a fourfold gospel, a *euaggelion tetramorphon*.⁵¹ Since anonymous gospel books cannot be clearly differentiated, this fourfold gospel requires four named evangelists. Whether Irenaeus's statements preserve any genuine historical information is uncertain. What is more important is to note the profound change that takes place as

50. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

51. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.

previously anonymous and undifferentiated texts are assigned their own distinct identities.⁵²

Why These Four?

There was nothing inevitable about the four-gospel collection. None of the individual evangelists would have anticipated it. If they had done so, they might not have welcomed it: differences between gospels can often be interpreted as active disagreements. But the evangelists were not asked for their opinion on this matter. The fourfold gospel is the collective work of their *readers*, especially the many unknown individuals who made the crucial decisions about which gospel books should be used and read in their own local communities. It was such local decisions that gradually coalesced into an international consensus accepted by the churches of the East and the West.

It might have turned out differently. In view of the preference for Matthew, Mark might have fallen into disuse and disappeared from view. Matthew in turn might have been superseded by Luke; John might have been rejected on the grounds of its supposed incompatibility with earlier gospels. One gospel alone might have been selected, or several earlier gospels might have been combined into a single comprehensive work. The closed canonical collection might have been reopened so as to incorporate a fifth gospel. Indeed, early evidence suggests that just such scenarios actually took place in some local contexts. Any of them might in principle have prevailed—yet they did not. The collective decision went against them.

Mark was not everywhere eclipsed by Matthew; the Longer Ending was added by an editor who wanted to preserve the earlier gospel's independent status. Most readers preferred to see Luke as complementary to Matthew rather than as a competitor. The positive value of the Johannine testimony to Jesus' divinity outweighed concerns about compatibility with other and earlier gospels. Gospel

52. For early attestation of evangelists' names in the manuscript tradition, see S. Gathercole, "Titles of the Gospels."

books widely used in some areas failed to establish themselves in others. Circulation of some gospels was deliberately restricted to an elite group conscious of its spiritual superiority to the ordinary Christianity of mainstream churches. One way or another, use or awareness of four gospels must have had a broad-enough basis for Irenaeus's proposal that there *should be* four gospels to seem plausible and reasonable.

Irenaeus himself seems to have had little firsthand knowledge of any gospels other than the four. Texts that circulated widely in, say, Egypt may never have reached him and his fellow Christians in distant Gaul. Arguably, his main concern is not to assert the number four against those who advocate more or fewer gospels, but rather to ensure full recognition for all four texts alike. In Justin, two or three decades earlier, the gospel is essentially Matthew supplemented by Luke, with Mark and John known but barely used. For Irenaeus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John possessed equal status. In writing the gospel, they were engaged in a single collective enterprise. And the best evidence of their divine authorization was the fact that these texts were known and recognized throughout the Christian world, in the churches both of the Latin West and the Greek East. The gospel texts that came to be defined as "canonical" were the ones with the deepest roots and widest spread within early Christian usage.

The fourfold canonical gospel might have turned out quite differently, but that does not make it "arbitrary." It took the form it did not because some bishop or council forcibly imposed it on an unwilling or unthinking majority but because of countless small-scale decisions about which texts were to be copied and used and which were to be passed over. Irenaeus's concept of a fourfold gospel offers an interpretation of the general tendency of those small-scale decisions, and his interpretation became normative only because it was and still is accepted as credible and true.

A process of selection took place at every stage in the development of the gospel tradition, and an analogy from an earlier stage

may shed light on how the selection process operated. As his gospel draws to a close, the Johannine evangelist tells us that

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.⁵³

Some signs are selected for inclusion; others are excluded. The first and second of the selected signs are explicitly enumerated: the first sign was the transformation of water into wine, the second the healing of the royal official's son.⁵⁴ The enumeration is not maintained, but the selection process continues. The selected signs comprise the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda, the feeding of the five thousand, the walking on water, the bestowal of sight on the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. The evangelist (or his source) has selected these seven instances from others that might not have been so effective in pointing the way to eternal life. It would be futile to describe this selection as "arbitrary." The evangelist must have had his reasons for the selection he made, even if these are no longer accessible to us. "These are written so that you may believe" suggests a purposeful selection based on an evaluation of the available material.

Just as the Johannine evangelist selects the seven signs that seem to him most clearly to promote the faith that leads to life, so it is with the collective decision to select four gospels for much the same purpose. The processes by which some gospels were disseminated more rapidly and more widely than others are largely obscure, yet at every stage they must have included evaluations of truth and significance. To commission a new copy of a gospel book for use within one's community is to make a statement about its positive potential for that community's ongoing life. To allow another gospel book to lie unused, or to discard it altogether, is to judge it to

53. John 20:30–31.

54. Cf. John 2:11; 4:54.

be irrelevant, superseded, or misguided. The four-gospel collection represents the sum of local decisions of this kind, extending over more than a century.

In his brief statements about how, when, and where the evangelists came to write their gospels, Irenaeus traces the fourfold gospel back to four individual authors. He is right, of course: without the four author-editors primarily responsible for each of the individual texts, there could be no four-gospel collection. Yet authorial initiative is only part of the story. It is one thing to produce a gospel, but another for it to be recognized as “canonical”—that is, as normative for all present and future Christian communities. Canonical recognition is unlikely to be instantaneous; it requires a process of *discernment* on the part of a gospel’s early users. Half a century after Irenaeus, Origen made just this point with great clarity.

Luke’s gospel opens with the statement that “many have attempted to compile an account of what has taken place among us.” Origen is interested in that word “attempted.” Many attempted to write gospels but lacked the divine inspiration the church recognizes in the canonical four. And the church can make this distinction between genuine gospels and attempted ones because its members include “experienced money-changers” practiced in the art of separating the true from the counterfeit:

Just as, among the people of old, many claimed to prophesy, yet some of them were false prophets while others were true, and the people possessed the gift of discernment of spirits by which the true prophet was distinguished from the false; so now, in the new covenant, many wished to write gospels, but the “experienced money-changers” did not approve them all but selected some of them. The word “attempted” seems to imply an accusation against those who undertook the writing of gospels without the divine gift. For Matthew did not just “attempt” something but wrote by the Holy Spirit, as did Mark and John and also Luke. But as for the ones entitled *Gospel according to the Egyptians* or *Gospel of the Twelve*, their authors indeed “attempted.” . . . Indeed, there were “many” who “attempted.” For there is a *Gospel according*

to *Thomas* in circulation, and another *according to Matthias*, and many others. These are the work of those who “attempted.” But the church of God selected only the four.⁵⁵

55. Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 1. Origen’s point is closely related to Calvin’s, as summarized by John Webster: “The church’s act with respect to the canon is an act of faithful *assent* rather than a self-derived judgment” (*Holy Scripture*, 62 [emphasis original]). That this distinction cannot be demonstrated on neutral terrain does not detract from its significance.