BASILIDES’S GOSPEL
AND EXEGETICA (TREATISES)

BY

JAMES A KELHOFER

ABSTRACT The surviving witnesses to Basihdes of Alexandria (fl 120-140 CE) reflect considerable variety and confusion concerning his writing(s). Attempts by scholars to present Basihdes as an exegete of Christian scripture, and even as the author of a gospel, are based on precious little evidence, which scholars have at times misinterpreted. This article argues that only a limited interest in gospel materials on the part of Basihdes can be demonstrated from the surviving portions of his Exegetica (Treatises). Moreover, if Basihdes did indeed write a gospel, it was not a narrative or sayings gospel concerned primarily with the life or the teachings of Jesus. Finally, prior to Origen in the mid-third century CE the designation (or title) Exegetica did not connote an ‘exegetical’ commentary Clement of Alexandria’s title for Basihdes’s work (‘Ἐξηγητικά, Strom 4.81.1) instead supports the inference that this writing comprised “explanations” of Basihdes’s theological system.

Relatively little is known for sure concerning the life of Basihdes of Alexandria (fl 120-140 CE). He was probably active in Alexandria during the 130s CE. The paucity of evidence and contradictory nature of the

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2 B A. Pearson, "Pre-Valentinian Gnosticism in Alexandria," in The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester (ed. B A. Pearson et al., Minneapolis Fortress, 1991), 455-66, here, 461, notes evidence for Basihdes’s activity in Alexandria in 132 CE. "According to Clement of Alexandria (Stromates 7.106) he was active in Alexandria during the reigns of the emperors Hadrian (117-138) and Antoninus Pius (138-161). Eusebius, in his Chronicon (according to Jerome’s Latin version), lists as one of the items for the sixteenth year of Hadrian’s reign (132) the following notation ‘Basihdes the heresiarch was living in Alexandria. From him derive the Gnostics’. Apparently following Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, De viris illustribus 21, writes ‘Basihdes died at Alexandria in the reign of Hadrian, and from him the Gnostic sects arose. In this tempestuous time also, Cochebas, leader of the Jewish faction, put Christians to death with various tortures’ (ET A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., Nicene and Post Nilene Fathers of the Christian Church [New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1890-1900], 2/3 368). Jerome’s
patristic witnesses to Basilides have not, however, stopped scholars from describing with some confidence the early Christian gospel, and especially the gospel commentary, that Basilides allegedly wrote.

In the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum, for example, Kurt Aland cites the Gospel according to Basilides as the source of a distinctive witness to Matt 7:6ab.3 Von Campenhausen exemplifies this position concerning Basilides's alleged gospel: "In all probability it was at first, as Agrippa Castor says . . ., referred to by them simply as 'the Gospel'. The designation κατά Βασιλείδην εὐαγγέλιον . . . may not originally have been attached to it."4 Walter Bauer, Werner Foerster, Gerhard May, Everett Procter and Andrew F. Gregory concur that Basilides did in fact write a gospel.5

In addition to the claim that Basilides wrote a gospel, a number of other scholars characterize Basilides as a Christian teacher who wrote a gospel commentary. For instance, in an important study Winrich A. Löhr argues concerning Basilides and Basilides's son and disciple Isidore:

Basilides . . . kommentierte eine selbst erstellte Evangelienrezension in 24 Büchern; . . . So kann man in duren Worten das Wesentliche an biographi-

allusion to the “tempestuous time” of the Second Jewish Revolt led by Bar Kokhba suggests that Basilides was active 132-135 C.E. Cf. the observation of W. A. Löhr, Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts (WUNT 83; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 20, that “aus den übrigen Quellen erhebt sich kein Widerspruch gegen die Datierung des Clemens” (cf. 326).


Others, including Theodor Zahn, Hans Windisch, Robert M. Grant, Bentley Layton, Everett Procter, M. J. Edwards, and Christoph Markschies, likewise characterize Basilides as an exegete of gospel materials, and sometimes of other Christian scripture as well.

This article offers a critical assessment of these two claims about Basilides's gospel and gospel commentary. It will be argued that if a writing of Basilides did receive the designation “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον), it was not a narrative or sayings gospel concerned primarily with the life and teachings of Jesus. This inquiry is of obvious (potential) interest to the use of the term εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation in the first half of the second century. The article also considers the relationship of Basilides's Exegetica

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(Treatises) to other early Christian literature. This study argues that the characterization of Basilides as an exegete of Christian scripture is based on precious little evidence and, at times, a misinterpretation of certain witnesses to Basilides and his writing(s). A (mostly) diachronic survey of the main witnesses to Basilides’s life and writings will precede an analysis of claims that scholars have made about Basilides’s gospel and gospel commentary.

Witnesses to Basilides’s Gospel and Exegetica (Treatises)

1. Irenaeus, Adversus haereses I.24.4

Irenaeus attributes the following description of the crucifixion to Basilides:

He [Christ] appeared on earth as a man and performed miracles (apparuisse eum... virtutes perfecisse). Thus, he himself did not suffer. Rather, a certain Simon of Cyrene was compelled (Simonem quendam Cyrenaeum angariatum) to carry his cross for him. It was he [Simon] who was ignorantly and erroneously crucified (et hunc... crucifixum), being transfigured by him [Jesus], so that (ut) he [Simon] might be thought to be Jesus. Moreover, Jesus assumed the form of Simon and stood by, laughing at them.9

With regard to accounting for Jesus’ laughter, R. M. Grant notes the likely OT foundation of Basilides’s (re-)interpretation of Jesus’ passion in light of Psalm 2.10


10 “Gnostic Origins and the Basilidians of Irenaeus,” VC 13 (1959): 121-5; here, 123-4: “Why was he [Jesus] laughing? The answer seems to be provided by the words of a Psalm which we know was interpreted messianically by early Christians. Psalm 2 begins with a picture of the ‘archons’ (LXX) conspiring ‘against the Lord and his Anointed,’ and it goes on to say that ‘he who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision’ (verse 4). Here is, or may well be, the source of the notion that the Savior derided his enemies.” Cf. Löhrl, Basilides, 265 n. 38.
Irenaeus's depiction of Basilides's Docetic christology appears, moreover, to be based upon an interpretation of material preserved in Mark 15:21 and the Matthean parallel passage (Matt 27:32). Mark has the (historic) present active indicative (άγγαρεύουσιν), which Matthew changed to the aorist (ήγγάρευσαν). At the very least, the perfect passive participle reflected by Irenaeus (angariatus) stems from Irenaeus's (undisputed) use of either or both of these gospels, or perhaps a harmonized version of this gospel material. With regard to assessing the historical Basilides's interest in gospel materials, however, the testimony of Irenaeus is of questionable value.

2. The Title and Length of Basilides's Treatises or Exegetica

Concerning Basilides's own work(s), there is good evidence for the existence and contents of certain parts of his *Treatises* or *Exegetica*. Two extended portions and one short passage from this work survive. One of the two

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11 Mark 15:21-24: “[21] They compelled (άγγαρεύουσιν) a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene (τινα Σίμωνα Κυρηναϊον), the father of Alexander and Rufus. [22] Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). [23] And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. [24] And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.”

12 Matt 27:32-35: “[32] As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon (άνθρωπον Κυρηναϊον ονόματι Σίμωνα); they compelled (ήγγάρευσαν) this man to carry his cross. [33] And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), [34] they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. [35] And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots.” Different from Mark 15:21 || Matt 27:32, Luke 23:26 has ἐπιτίθημι rather than ἄγαρεύω (καί ώς άπήγαγον αυτόν, ἐπιλαβόμενοι Σίμωνα τίνα Κυρηναϊον ἐρχόμενον ἀκ’ ἄγρου ἐκδίδοντα αὐτῷ τόν σταυρόν φέρειν δικαίως τοῦ Ιησοῦ).


14 With Löhr, *Basilides*, 255-73, who argues that Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I.24.3-7, which includes the testimony about Jesus and Simon of Cyrene at the crucifixion (I.24.4), derives from source material that can plausibly be dated to the mid-second century. Despite its early date, Löhr (272-3) doubts that *Adv. haer.* I.24.3-7 offers a reliable witness to the historical Basilides; so also F. Legge, *Philosophumena, Or the Refutation of All Heresies* (2 Vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1921), 2.79 n. 2; D. Wanke, *Das Kreuz Christi bei Irenaeus von Lyon* (BZNW 99; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2000), 75-6.
longer sections is in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis*. The other two passages appear in Hegemonius’s *Acta Archelai* (c. 330/348 C.E.), an anti-Manichaean writing that survives in Latin.

This writing of Basilides, whatever its original contents and foci, must have been a sizeable work, since Clement claims to quote from its twenty-third book (Βασιλείδης δὲ ἐν τῷ εἰκοστῷ τρίτῳ τῶν Ἐξηγητικῶν, *Strom.* 4.81.1). Eusebius of Caesarea credits Agrippa Castor with having written a response to Basilides in the second century (*Hist. eccl.* 4.7.6-8). Eusebius quotes Agrippa Castor to the effect that Basilides’s work comprised a total of twenty-four books, and, as is argued below, at least the claim concerning the length of this work is credible. Arguably the surest indication that Basilides’s work was extensive is the *Acta Archelai*’s citation of Basilides’s own reference to its thirteenth book. The author of the *Acta Archelai* (Hegemonius) claims to be familiar with Basilides’s writing and cites Basilides’s reference to the thirteenth book of Basilides’s “Treatises” (Lat.: *tractatuum eius*, 67.5a; *nobis tractatuum*, 67.5b).

Moreover, the *Acta Archelai* attributes to Basilides himself both the title for this work (“Treatises”) and its organization into individual books. It may

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18 *Acta Archelai* 67.5b: “As we are writing the thirteenth book of our treatises (*nobis tractatuum*) the word of salvation (*salutaris sermo*) will provide for us the necessary and fruitful content.

19 The original Greek term used by Basilides for his work is open to question. Zahn, *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons*, 1/2.764, suggests ὁμιλία (“homily”); cf. Lörh, *Basilides*, 226. Two other possibilities are μεταχειρίσεις (or μεταχειρήσεις? “pursuits, studies, treatments”) and ψηλαφήσεις (“inquiries, searchings”). Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 4.81.1) offers the title Ἐξηγητικά, which is also possible in light of this article’s argument that Ἐξηγητικά need not denote an ‘exegetical’ biblical commentary.
thus be helpful for future scholarship to refer to Basilides's work by this title ('Treatises), or at least to include it along with Exegetica (Gk: Ἐξηγητικά, attested by Clement, Strom. 4.81.1). It will be argued that the extant fragments of the Exegetica ('Treatises') do not support the claim that this work was a gospel commentary. What can be ascertained about this work's content and genre will be evaluated in the following analyses of these fragments and, further below, of the most likely denotation of Clement's title for this work ('Ἐξηγητικά').

3. Clement's Witness to Basilides's Exegetica

Of the surviving portions of Basilides's Exegetica, the passage best known to scholars, from Clement's Stromateis, addresses human suffering.20 According to Clement, Basilides maintained that no person's tribulations are ordained by God. They are rather God's punishment for a person's sinfulness, either in this life or a previous one (Strom. 4.81.2-3). In this portion of his work, Basilides seeks above all to defend the goodness of Providence (τὸ προνοούν).21 As test-cases for this position, Basilides discusses the suffering of Christian martyrs, of a newborn baby, and of Jesus during the course of his life as a whole (but not specifically the crucifixion).

With the possible exception of Stromateis 4.81.2,22 there is no indication

20 Clem., Strom. 4.81.2-83.1. Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 418, notes that, different from Irenaeus and Hippolytus, "St. Clement is not entirely hostile to Basilides, and in general his conciliatory attitude toward thinkers he disagrees with adds to his trustworthiness as a reporter." Layton thus infers that, as compared with the other patristic evidence, Clement's witness is "[m]ost trustworthy of all the reports about Basilides." Note, e.g., that in Strom. 3.1-2 Clement is careful to attribute a citation of Matt 19:11-12 to Basilides's followers (ὁ... ἀπὸ Βασιλείδου) rather than to Basilides himself. Similarly, according to Clem., Strom. 1.146.1, followers of Basilides (ὁ... ἀπὸ Βασιλείδου) hold a festival on the (supposed) day of Jesus' baptism and spend the night reading (προδιανυστερεύοντες ἐν ἀναγνώσει).

21 Basilides, Exegetica, apud Clem., Strom. 4.82.2c: "For I will say anything (πάντ') rather than call Providence evil." Cf. Lohr, Basilides, 131-2; Procter, Christian Controversy in Alexandria, 88-93.

22 Basilides, Exegetica, apud Clem., Strom. 4.82.2a ("Indeed, someone who intends to commit adultery is an adulterer even without succeeding in the act, and someone who intends to commit murder is a murderer even without being able to commit the act.") has obvious similarities to Matt 5:27-28 and 5:21-22 (cf. Lohr, Basilides, 128 n. 16; "vermutlich biblisch inspirierten (vgl. z. B. Mt 5,21.27) Beispiele. . ."). Nonetheless, the majority of Basilides's excerpted discussion on human suffering is not 'exegetical' of 'gospel' or other 'biblical' materials (cf. Lohr, Basilides, 131).
that Basilides is attempting to ‘exegete’ a written gospel. The same is true for three other parts of the Stromateis that allude briefly to Basilides’s view of suffering. Thus, concerning the portions of Basilides’s work that Clement cites and paraphrases, Clement’s title (Ἐξηγητικά, Strom. 4.81.1) does not support the inference that Basilides wrote a commentary on gospel or other biblical materials. This point will be taken up in greater detail below.

4. The Acta Archelai on Basilides’s Treatises


Concerning the interpretation of the parable, Basilides writes: “By means of the parable of the rich man and the poor man, it [the word of salvation] demonstrates the source of the nature that comes upon things with-

23 Although Lohr recognizes this point in the case of Clement, Strom. 4.81.2-3, he and other scholars persist in identifying Basilides as an exegete of Christian scripture. See Lohr, Basilides, 12-13, 34, 215, 325-6, 329; Grant, Second-Century Christianity, 18; Ayer, Source Book, 82; Windisch, “Evangelium des Basildes.”


25 Lat.: per parabolam divitis et pauperis. In Luke 16:19a, τις . . . πλούσιος = quidam . . . dives (VL and Vg). In Luke 16:20a, πτωχός δὲ τις = quidam mendicus (Vg). According to W. Matzkow und K. Aland, eds., Italia: Das Neue Testament in altlateinischer Überlieferung (Vol. 3: Lucas-Evangelium; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1976), 3.188, the Vetus Latina and the Vulgate consistently translate πλούσιος (Luke 16:19a) as dives (so also Basilides apud Hegemonius’s Acta Archelai). In the case of πτωχός (Luke 16:20a), a majority of the second-century Old Latin mss (aur b c ff 2 q) and the Vulgate differ with Hegemonius’s translation of Basilides and attest mendicus. Certain Old Latin mss, however, have pauper (a d i k; also Basilides apud Hegemonius), and one VL version has pauperculus (r’). Thus, the key terms used by Basilides for identifying this parable (dives and pauper) are attested, respectively, by all (πλούσιος, Luke 16:19a) and some (πτωχός, Luke 16:20a) of the Old Latin mss. Such similarities in wording suggest the likelihood that Basilides did in fact refer to the Lukan Parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man (Luke 16:19-31).

26 If correct, Basilides would offer an early witness to this Lukan material (= Luke?) in the first half of the second century. Moreover, Basilides alludes to “the word of salvation” (salutaris sermo), mentioned in Acta Archelai 67.5b. Cf. Gregory, The Reception of Luke and Acts, 78.
out a root or a place" (Acta Archelai 67.5c). In Luke 16:19-31, the Parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man (Lazarus) represents special Lukan material (L), which, moreover, reflects this evangelist's particular interest in the poor.\(^{27}\) It thus seems at least plausible that Basilides came into contact with this special Lukan material from Luke's source(s), some writing dependent upon Luke, or, more probably, the gospel of Luke itself.\(^{28}\) In his own work, Basilides apparently offered an allegorical interpretation of this parable that the author of the Acta Archelai chose to cut off abruptly (67.6). Acta Archelai 67.5c thus offers evidence for connecting at least part of Basilides's Exegetica (or Treatises) with written gospel material.\(^{29}\)

The extended section from Basilides's work quoted in Acta Archelai 67.7-11 concerns a different topic from that in 67.6, namely a dualistic discussion of light and darkness, good and evil.\(^{30}\) Acta Archelai 67.7-11 reflects the view that "perfect good" is not to be found "in this world" (67.10), where only a portion of the Light is visible to humans.\(^{31}\) Yet this passage reveals no effort to exegete a 'biblical' text (not even Genesis 1!), much less any gospel material.

As noted above, Acta Archelai 67.7-11 offers a more extended citation from Basilides's work of a markedly different sort of material. According to Acta

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\(^{28}\) Basilides's knowledge of Lukan gospel material might contribute to an explanation for why (the non-Gnostic) Marcion, who canonized an edited version of Luke, came to be criticized along with others such as Basilides, who were deemed to be 'Gnostics.' See Justin, Dial. 35.6; Clement, Strom. 7.106.4-107.1, 7.108.1; Muratorian Canon; Hegesippus apud Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 4.22.4-6.

\(^{29}\) The present author agrees with Löhre's arguments in favor of the authenticity of this citation of Basilides's work (Basilides, 248-9), but disagrees with Löhre's inference that this material is representative of a sort of gospel commentary by Basilides: "Das alles paßt gut zu Basilides und seinem Evangelienkommentar" (Basilides, 248; cf. 227-9).

\(^{30}\) In Acta Archelai 67.7, Basilides mentions the view of some "barbarians," who "have said that all things have two beginnings (initia omnium duo), to which they have associated good and evil (bona et mala), stating that these beginnings themselves are without beginning and unbegotten (sine initio esse et ingenita). In other words, there was in the beginning Light and Darkness (in principiis luem fuisse ac tenebras), which existed of themselves, which were not said to be begotten."

\(^{31}\) Acta Archelai 67.11. The author of the Acta Archelai summarizes the importance of this dualistic cosmogony to Basilides's system as follows: "So if anyone is able to demolish the unbegotten dualism (subvertere . . . ingeniam dualitatem), which he propounds, then I say he would at the same time cut down the entire forest of his words" (68.2).
Archelai 67.6, this material appears in Basilides’s work after an interval of some “five hundred lines.” It is not clear whether the five hundred lines omitted in Acta Archelai 67 were devoted to the Lukan parable (cf. Luke 16:19-31) or to some other matter.

5. Origen on the Gospel according to Basilides

A question of significance equal to the extent to which Basilides’s work may have been ‘exegetical’ is the question whether Basilides or his followers would have acknowledged the term εὐαγγέλιον as a description for a gospel that he allegedly wrote. Origen offers the earliest testimony to a gospel written by Basilides:

The church has four gospels. Heretics have very many. One of them is entitled According to the Egyptians, another According to the Twelve Apostles. Basilides, too, dared to write a gospel and give it his own name (ἔτολμησε καὶ Βασιλείδης γράψαι κατὰ Βασιλείδην εὐαγγέλιον). “Many have tried” to write, but only four gospels have been approved.  

Neither Origen nor any of the subsequent patristic witnesses to the existence of Basilides’s gospel reveal anything about the content of this alleged writing, however.

6. Hippolytus, Refutatio VII.20-27, X.14

Hippolytus of Rome claims to represent Basilides’s uses of the term εὐαγγέλιον eight times in six passages:

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Ref. VII.25.5: When then, he says, it was necessary for the children (τέκνα) of God to be revealed to us... the gospel came into the world (ήλθε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον εἰς τὸν κόσμον). . . .

Ref. VII.26.1: Therefore the gospel came [first] from the Sonhood (ἡλθεν σών τὸ εὐαγγέλιον <πρῶτον> ἀπὸ τῆς υἱότητος), he says to the Ruler, through his Son who sits beside him....

Ref. VII.26.4: It was still necessary for the gospel to come (ἔδει λοιπὸν... ἐλθὲν τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) also to the Hebdomad, in order that the Ruler of the Hebdomad might be taught in like manner and evangelized (τὰ... διδαχθῆ καὶ εὐαγγελισθῆσθαι).

Ref. VII.26.5: And the Son of the Ruler of the Hebdomad was enlightened, and he proclaimed the gospel (ἐφωτίσθη... καὶ εὐηγγελίσατο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) to the ruler of the Hebdomad. . . .

Ref. VII.27.7 (three occurrences): In order that we may omit nothing from their [doctrines], I will set forth what they say also about [the?] gospel (περί εὐαγγελίου). Gospel is according to them the knowledge of hyper-cosmic things (εὐαγγελίου ἐστι... ἐν τοῖς ὑπερκοσμίων γνώσισι), as has been made plain, which the Great Ruler did not understand. When then there was manifested to him what are the Holy Spirit (that is, the Boundary), and the Sonhood (ἡ υἱότης) and the God-who-is-Not (ὁ θεός... ὁ οὐκ οἶν) (who is the cause of all these), he rejoiced at the things that had been said and exulted, and this according to them is the gospel (τοῦτ' ἐστι κατ' αὐτούς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον).

Ref. X.14.9: And [Basilides] says that on Jesus who was born of Mary the power of the Gospel (κεχωρηκέναι τὴν εὐαγγελίου δύναμι<ν>), which descended and illumined the Son of the Ogdoad and the Son of the Hebdomad for the illumination and separation and purification of the Sonhood left behind that he might benefit and receive benefits from the souls.

These citations in Hippolytus, Refutatio VII.25-27, X.14 reflect understandings of εὐαγγέλιον as a revelation (Ref. VII.25.5, 26.1, 26.4), as oral procla-
information (Ref. VII.26.5), as the knowledge (γνώσις) of things revealed (Ref. VII.27.7), and as the manifestation of divine power (Ref. X.14.9).

Thus, different from the attribution of Origen (Homilies on Luke 1.2) and others, Hippolytus reflects no knowledge of a work by Basilides identified by the literary designation εὐαγγέλιον. Nor does Hippolytus suggest that the various gospel citations attributed to Basilides were considered εὐαγγέλιον. This is somewhat surprising, since Hippolytus’s (secondary) testimony presents a “Basilides”—or perhaps in fact later ‘Basilidians’—who made extensive use of numerous ‘NT’ writings, including the gospels.

7. Epiphanius: Reworking Irenaeus and Encountering the (Later) Followers of Basilides

In his Panarion (c. 374-377 C.E.), Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 310/320-402/3 C.E.) seems to know some form of the tradition preserved by Irenaeus:

He [Basilides] claims that not Jesus, but Simon of Cyrene, has suffered. When the Lord was taken (ἐκβάλλω) from Jerusalem, as the sequence of the Gospel has it (ὡς έχει ή ακολουθία του εὐαγγελίου), they compelled a certain Simon of Gyrene to bear the cross. . . . While he [Simon] was being crucified, . . .

55 Interestingly, according to Hippolytus, Basilides’s use of the ‘NT’ gospels is, for the most part, limited to their opening chapters. See Ref. VII.21.3 (possibly alluding to Mark 4:30-32 par.); VII.22.3-4 (citing John 1:9 after Gen 1:3); VII.26.9 (citing Luke 1:35); VII.27.5 (citing John 2:4b, and then mentioning the Magi of Matt 2:1-6 [οι μάγοι . . . τον ἄστέρα τεθεαμένον]). At no point is the term εὐαγγέλιον used in connection with any of these gospel citations or allusions, however. Cf. Hippol., Ref. VII.22.13 (possibly alluding to Eph 1:21); VII.23.5 (apparently alluding to 1 Cor 3:10); VII.25.2 (citing a combination of Rom 5:13, 14a); VII.25.3 (citing parts of Rom 8:22, 19; Eph 1:21); VII.26.2 (citing Prov 1:7/9:10/Ps 110:10); VII.26.3 (citing 1 Cor 2:7, 13); VII.26.4 (citing a combination of Ps 31:5-6, 51:11); VII.26.7 (citing Eph 3:5a, 3a; 2 Cor 12:4).

56 Following Löhr, Basilides, 313-23, that Hippolytus does not offer a reliable witness to the historical Basilides.

57 With Löhr, Basilides, 273: “Der Basilidesbericht bei Irenäus, haer. 1.24,3-7 ist direkt oder indirekt die Quelle weiterer häresiologischer Referate bei Pseudotertullian, Epiphanius v. Salamis sowie Filastrius von Brescia.”

Jesus stood opposite him unseen, laughing at those who were crucifying Simon. But he himself flew off on high once he had delivered Simon to crucifixion, and returned to heaven without suffering.  

Concerning the reliability of this testimony, however, it is doubtful that Epiphanius's version of Irenaeus's (questionable) testimony offers a reliable source for the historical Basilides.

Epiphanius had visited Egypt around 335 C.E. and had come into contact there with Basilidians, who apparently tried both to convert and to seduce him (Panarion 26.17.4-9). At one point Epiphanius quotes Basilides as follows:

But the vagabond [Basilides] says (αλλα φησιν ο αγυρτης), "We are the ones who are the human beings (οι άνθρωποι), and all the others are pigs and dogs (ης και κυνες). Therefore he/it [Basilides? Jesus? a 'gospel'?] said (δια τούτο ειπεν), 'Do not cast pearls before the swine or give what is holy to the dogs (μη βαλητε τους μαργαριτας εμπροσθεν των χοιρων, μηδε δωτε το αγιον τοις κυσιν [= Matt 7:6ab]).'" (Panarion 24.5.2)

The citation presents, in reverse order (!), the two imperatives of Matt 7:6ab, without the possessive pronoun υμων. Epiphanius's citation includes none of the remainder of the saying as preserved in Matt 7:6cd. Although this saying is not attested in the other NT gospels, Didache 9.5 (μη δωτε το αγιον τοις κυσι) contains part of it, possibly from some form of Matt 7:6a. Moreover, a version of the saying in Gospel of Thomas 93 reflects redactional expansion that interrupts the flow of the version of the saying as preserved in Matthew. Thus, if a written source lies behind this testimony of Epiphanius, it is most probably either Matthew or some writing based upon Matthew. Of course, this conclusion concerning Panarion 24.5.2 implies nothing concerning Basilides’s own use of ‘gospel’ materials.


39 Epiphanius, Panarion 24.3.2, 4; cf. 24.4.1, 24.8.6-8, 24.9.3-24.10.4.

40 With Lohr, Basilides, 37, 275-80; see above on Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 1.24.4.


42 Matt 7:6cd: μηποτε καταστασισουσιν αυτοις εν τοις κυσιν αυτων και στραφεντες θησαι σωμα.

43 Gos. Thom. 93: "[Jesus said,] 'Do not give what is holy to dogs, lest they throw them on the dung heap. Do not throw the pearls to swine, lest they ... it [...].'" ET by T. O. Lambdin in: J. M. Robinson, gen. ed., NHL, 136.
Analysis: Did Basilides Write a Gospel?

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, von Campenhausen, although cautious concerning what can be known about the content of Basilides's gospel, is persuaded that such a writing circulated with the title εὐαγγέλιον. Von Campenhausen bases this inference upon the following testimony of Agrippa Castor, as preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea: "In expounding his [Basilides's] mysteries he [Castor] says that he [Basilides] compiled twenty-four books on the gospel (εις το εὐαγγέλιον τέσσαρα . . . είκοσι συντάξαι βιβλία)" (Hist. eccl. 4.7.7; cf. 4.7.4-6). Accordingly, von Campenhausen's inference rests upon the reliability of this testimony.

The question whether Hist. eccl. 4.7.7 claims that Basilides compiled gospel materials (presumably, from sundry gospels), or materials about the gospel (that is, commentaries), hangs on the interpretation of the verb συντάσσω. Elsewhere in his Church History, Eusebius uses this verb in a citation of the (notoriously problematic) testimony of Papias of Hierapolis, that "Matthew compiled the sayings (τα λογία συνετάξατο) in the Hebrew/Aramaic language, and each one interpreted them as he was able" (Hist. eccl. 3.39.16). The meaning of συντάσσω in Hist. eccl. 3.39.16 is quite straightforward: Matthew is said to have 'compiled' or 'organized' a collection of Hebrew/Aramaic sayings of Jesus. If this definition of συντάσσω is applied to Hist. eccl. 4.7.7, it would follow that Eusebius (perhaps also Agrippa Castor) regards Basilides's work as comprising primarily gospel materials and not commentaries "on the Gospel."

The fragments of Basilides's surviving work, however, cannot be used to support the accuracy of the testimony of Agrippa Castor (or at least Eusebius's presentation of it). Moreover, it would be mistaken to infer that, in the absence of polemic against Basilides, Eusebius's testimony can be taken at face value. It thus follows that von Campenhausen's basing an inference upon this uncorroborated testimony (Hist. eccl. 4.7.7), that Basilides's gospel was known as το εὐαγγέλιον, is tenuous.

44 Von Campenhausen, Formation, 139 n. 161: "In all probability it was at first, as Agrippa Castor says . . ., referred to by them simply as 'the Gospel'. The designation κατὰ Βασιλείδην εὐαγγέλιον . . . may not originally have been attached to it."
46 Pace Lörhr, Basilides, 11-12.
47 With Lörhr, Basilides, 33; cf. 33-4 on the work of Psalms that Origen elsewhere (Com. on Job 21:12) attributes to Basilides. Lörhr further notes concerning Origen, Comm.
Analysis: The Content and Character of Basilides's Treatises (Exegetica)

1. Did Basilides Write a Gospel (or Biblical) Commentary?

As noted above, Zahn, Windisch, Grant, Layton, Löhr, Procter and Edwards maintain that Basilides of Alexandria wrote a gospel (or biblical) commentary. It remains to consider whether the evidence could support this characterization of Basilides's writing. Indeed, it does not.

Two of the three surviving portions of Basilides's work are not involved primarily with biblical interpretation or 'exegesis' of any kind. One is a treatise on Providence (Clem., Strom. 4.81-83), and the other reflects a dualistic understanding of good and evil (Acta Archelai 67.7-11). However much interest Basilides may have had in the Parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man (cf. Luke 16:19-31) is not clear from the short allusion in Acta Archelai 67.5c. It thus follows that the surviving portions of Basilides's Treatises (or Exegetica) do not commend a primary characterization of Basilides's work as an 'exegesis' of gospels or other Christian literature or, for that matter, any kind of a biblical commentary. Nor does the evidence support Löhr's characterization of Basilides's oeuvre as a work that took scripture as the starting point for the exploration of various theological topics. Although someone like Irenaeus in the second century could be described as an exegete without having produced an entire work that constitutes a patristic biblical commentary, the surviving evidence does not support an analogous attribution in the case of Basilides.

2. ΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚΑ as a Literary Designation or Title

In light of the conclusion that Basilides did not write a gospel (or biblical) commentary, the question may thus be raised: Why is it that Basilides came to be credited with having written such a work? The origins of this influential position in scholarship are perhaps indebted to Clement of Alexandria's use of Exegetica as the title for Basilides's work (Gk.: Ἐξηγητικά, Matth. Ser. 38 (on Matt 24:7): "Unser Fragment gibt also keinen Aufschluß über eine positive Lehre des Basilides und seiner Anhanger . . ." (211). H.-C. Puech ("Gospel of Basilides," 399; cf. 398) is likewise cautious concerning what can be known about this work: "In short, it must be said that all conjectures concerning the Gospel of Basilides remain uncertain."

48 See above, nn. 6-7.
49 Löhr, Basilides, 12-13; cf. 34, 215, 325-6, 329.
Unlike the title that the *Acta Archelai* attributes to Basilides himself (“*Treatises*,” attested in *Acta Archelai* 67.5a: *tractatae eius*; 67.b: *nobis tractatae*), the title attested by Clement may have suggested to some scholars that Basilides was an ‘exegete’ of scripture.

Yet even if one was to suppose that *Exegetica* served as a title for Basilides’s (*fl.* 120-140 c.e.) work, in Greek the term ἔξηγητικός almost never connotes a commentary on an esteemed body of literature prior to Origen in the mid-third century c.e. On the contrary, the adjective ἔξηγητικός pertains to a “narrative” or, more aptly for the surviving fragments of Basilides’s writing, an “explanation.”

The physician Galen (d. 199/200 c.e.), for example, uses the adjective in this way when referring to his own and others’ medical works as ἔξηγητικά υπομνήματα (“explanatory treatises”).

The only possible example I have found to the contrary is the following description of a work by the Hellenistic Jewish author Aristobulus of Alexandria (2nd c. B.C.E.) by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Hist. eccl.* 7.32.16): βίβλους ἔξηγητικάς του Μωυσέως νόμου (“books that explain [or: ‘exegete’] the Law of Moses”). Notably, Eusebius (d. c. 340 c.e.) is later than Basilides (and Origen), but may well use ἔξηγητικά to describe Aristobulus’s work as explanatory of the Jewish Law in relation to Aristotelian philosophy (cf. Euseb., *Praep. evang.* 8.9) rather than as a commentary on the Law.

Moreover, prior to the time of Basilides ἔξηγητικά (less frequently, the singular, ἔξηγητικόν) is attested as the title for works, for example, by the
historian Autocleides (fl. early-3rd c. B.C.E.) on Alexander the Great. Unfortunately, like Basilides’s work, Autocleides’s and so many other Exegetica do not survive. For the present study it suffices to note that what can be ascertained about Autocleides’s (and other) Exegetica does not support the characterization of Basilides’s Exegetica as a commentary on an esteemed body of Christian literature. Rather, the “explanations” of Autocleides and others commend the otherwise straightforward inference that Basilides’s work offered “explanations” (ἐξηγητικά) of his own theology.

In fact, Clement himself does not claim on the basis of the title Ἐξηγητικά that Basilides’s work was ‘exegetical.’ Clement uses Ἐξηγητικά in reference to three different works in his Stromateis: In addition to that by Basilides, Clement discusses an Exegetica by Julius Cassian (fl. late-2nd c.) and the Explanations of the Prophet Parchor by Basilides’s son Isidore. Neither of these other two references to the term Ἐξηγητικά in the Stromateis warrants characterizing Basilides’s work as ‘exegetical.’ Clement mentions Cassian’s work in connection with Clement’s argument that “the philosophy of the Hebrews will be demonstrated beyond all contradiction to be the most ancient of all wisdom. This has been discussed with accuracy by Tatian in his book To the Greeks, and by Cassian in the first book of his Exegetica (ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ τῶν Ἐξηγητικῶν).” Although Cassian’s (lost) writing would obviously have reflected interest in the Mosaic Law, Clement presents this work not exclusively (or primarily) as a biblical commentary but

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53 The loci classici cited in LSJ (s.v. Ἐξηγητικά) are incomplete and not entirely correct. The title of Autocleides’s work is attested in Plutarch, Nicias 23.9.3 (ὡς Ἀύτοκλείδης διεγράψεν ἐν τοῖς Ἐξηγητικοῖς). The Greek text is available, e.g., in: B. Perrin, Plutarch’s Lives (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1916), 3.292. Plutarch may have derived this information from Philochorus of Athens (Hist.; 4th-3rd c. B.C.E.), Frag. 3b.328.F.135b. Other references to works with the title Exegetica (or Exegeticon) include: Aeschylus (Frags. 6th-5th c. B.C.E.), Frag. 42.4.480a.2, on a work by Timothenes. On an Exegetica by Anticleides, see Demon of Athens (Hist.; 4th-3th c. B.C.E.), Frag. 22.6 (ὡς Ἀντικλείδης ἐν τοῖς Ἐξηγητικοῖς υποσημάνει); Crates of Athens (Hist.; 1st c. B.C.E.), Frag. 3.5; Harpocration of Alexandria (Gramm.; 1st or 2nd c. C.E.), Lex. 233.5, 258.2 [cf. Lex. 200.11, 224.1]. Additional Exegetica receive mention in: Clidemus of Athens (Hist.; 5th c. B.C.E.), Frag. 20.4 (ὡς Κλείδης ἐν τῷ ἐκπραγμένῳ Ἐξηγητικῷ); Phaenias Eresius (Phil.; 4th c. B.C.E.), Frag. 22b.4; Aristophanes Byzantius (Gramm.; 3rd-2nd c. B.C.E.), Frag. 76.4; Erobianus (Gramm. et Med.; 1st c. C.E.), Vocabus Hippocr. 85.6, 85.10, 115.5, 116.12; Frag. 40.2; Athenaeus (Soph.; 2nd-3rd c. C.E.), Deipn. 9.78.8, 11.34.18, 11.46.4 (ὡς Ἀντικλείδης φησίν ἐν τῷ Ἐξηγητικῷ γράφων ὁμοίως . . .).

as a discussion of scripture in relation to Hellenistic philosophic literature. Likewise, Clement’s three citations from Isidore’s Explanations of the Prophet Parchor do not characterize Isidore’s work as ‘exegetical.’

On the contrary, the inference that Basilides’s writing offered “explanations” (Ἐξηγητικά) of, or “treatises” (Acta Archelai 67.5a: tractatuum eius) on, his system accords with what the surviving fragments reveal about this work, as well as with the customary use of ἔξηγητικά until Origen in the mid-third century c.e. However tempting it may be to interpret Basilides’s so-called Ἐξηγητικά in proto-Orthodox terms, or to highlight his purported innovation, the notion that Basilides wrote an extensive gospel (or biblical) commentary is unfounded and most probably inaccurate. This conclusion does not, however, dispute (or confirm) the importance of Jesus in Basilides’s thought. By analogy, the apostle Paul places much weight on Jesus’ significance, but hardly anyone would attribute to Paul written gospel materials.

Conclusion: Basilides and ‘Gospel’ in the First Half of the Second Century

This article views as highly unlikely the possibility that Basilides wrote a gospel concerned primarily with the life and teachings of Jesus. It has also been argued that there is no credible evidence that Basilides recognized (any of) his own work(s) with the name εὐαγγέλιον (cf. Hippol., Ref. VII.25.5, 26.1, 26.4-5, 27.7; X.14.9; Epiphanius, Panarion 24.5.2). These conclusions do not necessarily set aside another possibility, however, namely that

55 Clem., Strom. 6.6.53: “And Isidore, at once son and disciple to Basilides, in the first book of the Expositions of the Prophet Parchor (ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ τῶν τῶν προφήτου Παρχώρ Ἐξηγητικῶν), writes also in these words: ‘The Attics say that certain things were intimated to Socrates, in consequence of a demon attending upon him. And Aristotle says that all men are provided with demons, that attend on them during the time they are in the body—having taken this piece of prophetic instruction and transferred it to his own books, without acknowledging whence he had abstracted this statement.’ And again, in the second book of his work, he thus writes: ‘And let no one think that what we say is peculiar to the elect was said before by any philosophers. For it is not a discovery of theirs. For having appropriated it from our prophets, they attributed it to him who is wise according to them.’ Again, in the same: ‘For to me it appears that those who profess to philosophize, do so that they may learn what is the winged oak, and the variegated robe on it, all of which Pherecles has employed as theological allegories, having taken them from the prophecy of Chum.’”

56 E.g., Eusebius of Caesarea, Praep. Evang. 6.10.50.7, referring to Origen’s Commentary on Genesis (Εἰς τὴν Γένεσιν ἑξηγητικὸς Οριγένης . . . διείληψε).
Basilides wrote a gospel whose content differed significantly from those of, for example, the 'NT' gospels and the Gospel of Thomas.

First, it must be pointed out that in the second century an evangelium scriptum need not be a narrative gospel (like, for example, the 'NT' gospels or the Gospel of Peter). A possible indication that a work bearing the designation εὐαγγέλιον could also be a theological work is the 'Gnostic' Gospel of Truth found at Nag Hammadi, and sometimes attributed to Valentinus (c. 105-165 C.E.). Irenaeus, moreover, notes the acceptance of a (the?) Gospel of Truth among the Valentinians, as well as differences in content between whatever gospel he knows by this name and the “gospels of the apostles” (Adv. haer. 3.11.9). At least for Irenaeus in the late-second century, there was no problem with using the term εὐαγγέλιον even for a ‘heretical’ gospel that differed significantly from the content of the ‘NT’ gospels. As a consequence, this study’s conclusions about what kind of a gospel Basilides did not write should be qualified.

But if one understands gospel as a narrative type of text (like the ‘NT’ gospels), then the evidence to support the contentions of K. Aland, W. Bauer, W. Foerster, G. May, E. Procter, H. von Campenhausen and A. Gregory that Basilides wrote a gospel is meager. There is no use of the term “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) in connection with a writing by Basilides prior to Origen. Moreover, Hippolytus (especially Ref. VII.27.7) consistently attributes to Basilides understandings of εὐαγγέλιον as oral proclamation or revelation rather than as a writing. Although it is possible that Basilides wrote a gospel like the Gospel of Truth, again, there is no evidence of it. Epiphanius’s citation of “Basilides,” reproduced by K. Aland in his Synopsis and regarded as evidence for the existence of a “gospel of Basilides,” must therefore be viewed with skepticism: The citation and the explanation of the text is, in essence, no different than what any number of patristic witnesses—from

57 This is only a possibility, however. On the uncertainties concerning the authorship of the Gospel of Truth and its original title (if it had one in antiquity), see Markschies, Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentinus (WUNT 65; Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), esp. 339-47.

58 Thus, Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels, 22, does not persuade when he assumes a connection between the designation εὐαγγέλιον and the content of a gospel: “This book [the Gospel of Truth] may have been composed by the famous Gnostic teacher Valentinus, and must be dated in the middle of the 2d century. It is not a writing that belongs to the gospel literature; but it is a homily or meditation. It uses the term ‘gospel’ in its incipit. . . .” An ET of the Gospel of Truth by H. W. Attridge and G. W. MacRae is available in: J. M. Robinson, gen. ed., NHL, 40-51. Cf. H.-J. Klauck, Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003 [2002]), 106, 123.
Irenaeus to John Chrysostom—offer, namely a passage quoted from the “common” text of the author’s time and place, and then interpreted according to that author’s understanding. Scholars do not presume that these Fathers were quoting their own gospel—a “Gospel of Irenaeus,” for example. Why here? Thus, this article’s suggestion that if Basilides ever did write a gospel, a possible literary analogy could be the Gospel of Truth. Indeed, the latter work bears some resemblance to the ‘narrative’ or ‘explanation’ that Basilides offers for his system in his Treatises (Exegetica).

Although this article has dismissed the notions that Basilides wrote either a gospel commentary or a gospel like Mark, John or Thomas, these conclusions do not discount Basilides’s prominence as a Christian leader in early-second century Alexandria. If anything, this study serves to highlight the distinctiveness of Basilides among the many voices and writings that flourished in early Christianity.

Department of Theological Studies, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO USA
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