‘Gospel’ as a Literary Title in Early Christianity and the Question of What Is (and Is Not) a ‘Gospel’ in Canons of Scholarly Literature

by

JAMES A. KELHOFFER

λέγει γάρ ὃ κύριος ἐν τῷ εὐαγγέλιῳ (2 Clem. 8:5)

A. Trying to Define What the Gospels Are (and Are Not)

The distinguished New Testament scholar and Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright in a book chapter entitled, “When Is a Gospel Not a Gospel?” objects to classifying the four NT gospels in the same literary category as any of the extracanonical gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas or the recently discovered Codex Tchacos, commonly known as the Gospel of Judas:

[T]he main difference is that, whereas the canonical gospels are news, Thomas and the others are advice. The canonical gospels tell a story of things that happened, through which the world has become a different place; “Thomas” and the others offer a list of musings, teachings about how one might engage in a different practice of spirituality, and through this means attain disembodied bliss. To that extent, though the gnostic documents do sometimes call themselves ‘gospels,’ they manifestly belong to a different genre.1

Wright bases his criteria of what the NT gospels are – and what other gospels are not – on the following “tripartite theme which runs through … all” the canonical gospels but not the others:2

First, they are recounting how the long story of God and Israel came to its God-ordained climax.3

---

2 Ibid., 72.
3 Ibid.
Second, the canonical gospels are telling the story of Jesus in such a way as to lay out the ground plan for the ongoing life of Jesus’ followers.  

Third, obviously but importantly, the canonical gospels tell the story of Jesus himself, and do so in such a way as to make the claim, on page after page, that it was through his life, public career, death and resurrection that God’s kingdom was indeed launched on earth as in heaven.

All three of Wright’s criteria concerning genre classification are based on his judgments about the theological content rather than the literary characteristics of the NT gospels in purported contradistinction to the extracanonical gospels. This invites the twin questions of whether writings can differ markedly in their viewpoints but because of formal similarities nonetheless share the same genre, and how writings of patently different genres can express the same, or complementary, viewpoints.

In the present volume dedicated to the study of the “apocryphal,” or extracanonical, gospels, Wright’s attempt to make such a clear demarcation of genre offers an opportunity to reflect on several important issues. These include the emergence of “gospel” as a literary designation in the early-second century and the question of the extent of the scholarly “canon” of extracanonical gospels. Concerning the latter, in a collection of “apocryphal gospels,” one can ask which of the various writings about Jesus scholars should classify as gospels and include for study in volumes, such as the Hennecke-Schneemelcher Neutestamentliche Apokryphen, for which a new sixth German edition of the volume on extracanonical gospels is currently in preparation. The final part of the present essay will address only a portion of this larger question with reference to the so-called ‘Gospel of Basilides’. In what follows a brief critique of N. T. Wright’s criteria precedes a discussion of the term “gospel” as a literary designation in Marcion, Second Clement and the Didache.

To Wright’s case for sequestering the NT gospels from their extracanonical counterparts several objections can be leveled. For one thing, it is not clear that any author of an extracanonical gospel would have conceded that

---

4 Ibid., 72–73.
5 Ibid., 74. Note in particular that the criterion is eschatological and based on the perception of a typical “first century Jew”: “[T]he gnostic gospels ... do not see Jesus inaugurating God’s kingdom in any sense that a first-century Jew would recognize, not even in the carefully modulated sense which Jesus himself articulated” (ibid., 75; cf. 81).
they were not writing, to use Wright’s phrase, “things that happened.” Moreover, simply to give a pass to the NT gospels – as though everything in them actually “happened” – would be equally myopic. One can, of course, note with Wright that “the gnostic documents do sometimes call themselves ‘gospels’” – a designation which, as is discussed below, was not originally used for any of the NT gospels but was subsequently added to them. It would indeed be odd, following Wright, to accord only to the NT gospels the designation “gospel,” which their authors did not use for their writings, and at the same time to deny this designation for any of the extracanonical writings, some of whose authors did use it. If, following Wright, we were not to refer to any of the extracanonical writings about Jesus as “gospels,” what shall we call them? And, more importantly, how shall we define their relationship to the four gospels that were eventually included in the NT?

Furthermore, Wright’s second criterion of laying “the ground plan for the ongoing life of Jesus’ followers” is suspect on at least two counts. One concerns the earliest recoverable ending to the gospel of Mark, which offers no such “ground plan” (Mark 16:1–8). The other concerns in extracanonical gospels the post-resurrection discussions between Jesus and his followers, which assume some continuation(s) of the Jesus movement, albeit arguably in different form(s) from those envisioned in Matthew, Luke and John. Finally, Wright’s third criterion of telling “the story of Jesus himself” so as to support a particular (and, exegetically, by no means uncontroversial) view of God’s kingdom in the NT gospels is too vague to be useful in classifying gospel literature. Again, the main shortcoming in Wright’s criteria concerns using theological content rather than formal characteristics for genre classification. To these observations one might add that it is well known, and appreciated, that Wright made his initial mark on scholarship by profoundly questioning the validity of an anachronistic approach to Paul and the Jewish Law informed by dogma of the Protestant Reformation. It would seem that his approach to gospel classification is in need of a similar enlightenment.

7 Cf. above on Wright, “When Is a Gospel Not a Gospel?” (see n. 1), 67 (emphasis original).
8 Ibid. This is not to concede, however, that all the extracanonical gospels should be described as “gnostic.” Cf. above on ibid., 67.
9 Cf. above on ibid., 72–73.
10 Ibid., 81.
B. The Emergence of ‘Gospel’ as a Literary Designation in Early Christianity

The above point that the (anonymous) authors of the NT gospels did not refer to their writings as “gospels” deserves to be underscored. The closest Wright comes in the aforementioned essay to acknowledging this point is as follows: “For the earliest Christians, the word ‘gospel’ was on the one hand rooted in the Old Testament and was on the other hand confronting a very different … ‘gospel’ of Caesar.” One can readily agree with Wright that in earliest Christianity “gospel” was not a literary designation but a term for oral proclamation of good news. But just when, and how, did this innovation of using “gospel” as a term for a writing about Jesus arise? The present section of this essay is devoted to answering this question.

That the authors of Mark and several other gospels did not give their works titles is not particularly surprising, for as Adela Yarbro Collins observes in her recent commentary on Mark:

[It is fair to say that in antiquity the giving and use of titles belonged somewhat more to the reception of works than to their production. … Thus, even if the author did not give his work a title, it is likely that whoever copied it and circulated it to other communities in other geographical locations gave it a title that mentioned Mark.]  

Collins further notes how striking it is that Mark did not acquire “two or more titles in the course of its early transmission,” which underscores the plausibility of the argument to be offered in the following subsections that at a very early point – prior to the composition of the Didache’s instructions for community leaders (Did. 6:3–15:4) – Mark had a title of some kind naming the work as (a) “gospel.”

1. Early Christian Definitions of “Gospel” and the Question of Marcion’s Innovation

I have argued elsewhere that the Didache offers a window to the earliest point at which the term εὐαγγέλιον designates written ‘gospel’ material(s),


13 WRIGHT, “When Is a Gospel Not a Gospel?” (see n. 1), 81.
15 Ibid., 3.
a point between the composition of Matthew and the Didache.\textsuperscript{16} To substantiate the plausibility of this thesis, several observations and arguments are required.

Helmut Koester has argued persuasively that in the writings of the apostle Paul, along with the authors of the deutero-Pauline letters and Acts, the term “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον), did not refer to a writing, such as any of the NT gospels. Koester also demonstrates this point for the rest of the NT literature and numerous other early Christian writings.\textsuperscript{17} Mark 16:9–20 offers an additional example in support of these arguments.\textsuperscript{18} These observations, however, do not address the possibility that some early Christian authors cited written ‘gospel’ materials without referring to them by the name εὐαγγέλιον or, for that matter, by any other fixed designation.\textsuperscript{19} Albeit correctly, Koester’s analysis only points out that εὐαγγέλιον was not a recognized designation for such written materials if they were used.

Following H. F. von Campenhausen, Koester maintains that Marcion of Sinope was the first person to use εὐαγγέλιον as a reference for an authoritative document, presumably in the 130s or early 140s C.E.\textsuperscript{20} More recently, Robert H. Gundry has offered his own analysis in support of Koester’s position.\textsuperscript{21} These scholars maintain correctly that, like the authors of the NT

\textsuperscript{16} The following points are made in greater detail in J. A. Kelhoffer, “‘How Soon a Book’ Revisited: ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ as a Reference to ‘Gospel’ Materials in the First Half of the Second Century,” ZNW 95 (2004), 1–34.

\textsuperscript{17} Koester’s arguments have most recently appeared in his Ancient Christian Gospels, Philadelphia (Valley Forge) 1990, 1–34, esp. 4–9 on Paul, the deutero-Paulines and Acts. Cf. M. Hengel, The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels, Harrisburg, PA 2000, 61–65. See also, e.g., Barn. 5:9; 8:3; Ignatius, Phld. 5:1–2; cf. 1 Clem. 42:1, 3; 47:2 (alluding to Paul’s letter to the Philippians 4:15); Barn. 14:9 (citing Isa 61:1); Polycarp, Phil. 6:3.

\textsuperscript{18} The author of this appendix to Mark uses τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (Mark 16:15b) and, additionally, ὁ λόγος (16:20c) in reference to preaching rather than to one or more written sources. See J. A. Kelhoffer, Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark, WUNT II/112, Tübingen 2000, 124–125.

\textsuperscript{19} Note Koester’s comment concerning “Polycarp [Philippians], who knew the Gospels of Matthew and Luke…. [I]t is remarkable that Polycarp never uses the term ‘gospel’ for these documents and that the words of Jesus are still quoted as if they were sayings drawn from the oral tradition” (Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 20).

\textsuperscript{20} Marcion (ca. 85–160 C.E.) was excommunicated in the summer of 144 according to Tertullian, Marc. 1.19. Cf. Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 35; H. F. von Campenhausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible, Philadelphia 1972, 147–163.

\textsuperscript{21} H. Gundry, “ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ: How Soon a Book?” JBL 115 (1996), 321–325, at 322 argues that “subapostolic literature” like the Didache, Second Clement and Ignatius’ letters “borrows from books that became canonical but does not use εὐαγγέλιον for any of those books.”
book of Acts, the deutero-Pauline epistles and Second Peter, Marcion was influenced by and derived authority from the legacy of the apostle Paul. Marcion apparently took Paul’s reference to God’s future judgment of the world “in accordance with [Paul’s] gospel” (κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου, Rom 2:16) as a Pauline recognition of a written document, a “gospel,” which Marcion (mis)construed as the gospel of Luke. Removing what he regarded as the ‘Judaizing’ tendency of later Christian redactors of both Luke and all except three of the NT writings attributed to Paul, Marcion published his own edition of these eleven writings. Koester infers, moreover, that Marcion’s community represents the first church with its own “scripture.”

Yet R. McL. Wilson notes the difficulty of postulating such a sudden transition during the mid-second century:

One major problem emerges: how was it that the canonical Gospels, which on Köster’s showing (p. 257) played in the first half of the second century ‘nur eine ganz untergeordnete Rolle’, had become by the time of Justin almost the only source (p. 267)? The picture here is, as Köster says, entirely different, yet the transition was effected in a few decades.

---


24 These Pauline letters correspond to the NT’s thirteen-letter Pauline corpus, minus the Pastoral Epistles (First Timothy, Second Timothy and Titus). Concerning this collection of Pauline letters, G. Lüdemann, Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity, Louisville, KY 1996, 167, clarifies: “As the two letters to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians and Colossians and Philemon (because of the striking similarity of the lists of greetings in both letters) were regarded as a unity, this gave a collection of seven letters of Paul.” Additionally, Marcion’s canon contained only one ‘gospel,’ namely his own edited version of Luke. Cf. Lüdemann, Heretics, 164–166; Von Campenhausen, Formation (see n. 20), 153.

25 Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 36, apparently following Von Campenhausen, Formation (see n. 20), 163. This generalization, however, overlooks the presumably earlier statement in 2Pet 3:15b–16, which equates some collection of Pauline letters with scripture (γραφή).

Marcion’s alleged novelty in this regard would indeed come as a surprise, because, as von Campenhausen observes, “Marcion supplied no attribution for his corrected text of Luke, but described it simply as ‘gospel.’” 27 That is to say, Marcion assumes that εὐαγγέλιον is already intelligible as a designation for a written gospel (that is, Luke) among his constituency. That later Christian writers like Justin never question εὐαγγέλιον as a fitting designation for (Marcion’s edited version of) Luke or for other ‘gospels’ also shows the need for caution in too quickly characterizing Marcion as the person to be credited with this innovation. Yet it is primarily on the basis of this criterion that Koester’s larger diachronic argument is presented, and thus also in what follows to be critiqued. The present study argues, on the contrary, that the earliest use of εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation predates not only Marcion but also Second Clement and the Didache.

2. εὐαγγέλιον in Second Clement

Four passages in Second Clement correlate closely with material preserved in one or more of the NT gospels. These passages illustrate that this author commonly refers to what survived elsewhere in written form as what the Lord “says” (λέγω): 2 Clem. 3:2 (cf. Matt 10:32); 2 Clem. 4:2 (cf. Matt 7:21); 2 Clem. 6:1 (Luke 16:13a); 2 Clem. 9:11 (cf. Mark 3:35 par.). As Koester observes, in Second Clement “[t]he present tense [λέγει] is customarily employed for the introductions of quotations from Scripture or from any written document. This would suggest that the author of 2 Clement quotes sayings of Jesus from a written work.” 28 Here Koester’s general point is helpful, even if the distinction he makes between the present tense λέγει and second aorist εἶπεν in Second Clement is not tenable. 29

Furthermore, in 2 Clem. 2:4 a citation of Mark 2:17 || Matt 9:13 (“I did not come to call the just but sinners”) is introduced as “another [part of] scripture” (καὶ ἑτέρα δὲ γραφή λέγει οὖν...). In 2 Clem. 2:4, the adjective ἑτέρα refers back to the author’s citation and interpretation of Isa 54:1 (2 Clem. 2:1–3). Thus, at 2 Clem. 2:4 the same authority is imputed to this word of Christ (cf. 2 Clem. 2:5–7; 19:1) as is accorded to Jewish scripture. In addition, the reference to Christ who “became flesh” (ἐγένετο σαρξ) in 2 Clem. 9:5 is likely indebted to John 1:14. 30 Koester also notes correctly

---

27 Ibid., 159.
28 KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 18.
30 Note the use of non-sayings material at this point. Cf. the possible reference to John 13:34 in 2 Clem. 9:6 (ἀγαπῶμεν οὖν ἀλλήλους).
that “[s]everal of the sayings of Jesus quoted in 2 Clement indeed reveal features which derive from the redactional activities of the authors of Matthew and Luke.”

Although one could question whether the presence of such redactional marks constitutes an absolute criterion for ascertaining direct literary dependence upon a NT gospel, Koester is certainly correct that parts of Second Clement are ultimately indebted to at least two, if not all four, of the NT gospels.

The author of Second Clement, moreover, reflects an interest in a variety of sayings attributed to Jesus that are not preserved in the NT gospels. For example, 2 Clem. 4:5 (εἶπεν ὁ κύριος) and 12:2 (ἐπερωτηθεὶς γὰρ αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ... εἶπεν) introduce sayings possibly stemming from the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of the Egyptians, or both works. Moreover, 2 Clem. 11:2 gives heed to a “prophetic word” (λέγει γὰρ καὶ ὁ προφητικὸς λόγος) presumably drawn from a non-NT document that is likewise cited with authority.

3. The Date of Second Clement

Of particular concern to the question of Marcion’s alleged innovation in developing a new use of the term “gospel” to designate a writing is the uncertainty about Second Clement’s date relative to Marcion. In his Ancient Christian Gospels, Koester dates Second Clement to 150 C.E. or “probably even later.” This date is notably after Marcion’s edited collection of ‘scripture’ (130s or early 140s C.E.). In his Introduction to the New Testament Koester offers the following argument in support of this position:

[T]here is evidence that 2 Clement cannot have been written in the earliest period of Christianity. The sayings of Jesus that are quoted in the writing presuppose the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke; they were probably drawn from a harmonizing

---

31 KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 18.
32 For a critique of Koester on the point, see KELHOFFER, Miracle and Mission (see n. 18), 123–130, cf. 130–137. The presence of redactional elements in Second Clement demonstrates the positive case for literary dependence, but the lack of the same would not necessarily dismiss this possibility.
34 As in 2 Clem. 11, the (different) author of First Clement also gives authority to this writing, introducing the same saying cited in 2 Clem. 11:2–4 as “this scripture” (ἡ γραφὴ αὕτη) in 1 Clem. 23:3 (cf. 2 Clem. 2:4).
collection of sayings that had been composed on the basis of these two gospels. 2 Clem. 8.5 refers to the written 'gospel' as a well-established entity.\footnote{H. Koester, \textit{Introduction to the New Testament}, vol. 2: \textit{History and Literature of Early Christianity}, Berlin 1995, 241–242; cf. \textit{IDEM}, \textit{Ancient Christian Gospels} (see n. 17), 18 n. 1.}

The argument has some merit in that the harmonization of materials from Matthew and Luke does not occur spontaneously upon the writing of these two works but would take at least some time to emerge.

Yet Second Clement is by no means the only early- to mid-second-century Christian writing to presuppose more than one of the NT gospels. Elsewhere I have argued that the composer / compiler of the Longer Ending of Mark (Mark 16:9–20) knew and drew heavily from the four gospels that were eventually incorporated into the NT.\footnote{K. Kelhoffer, \textit{Miracle and Mission} (see n. 18), 48–156.} In the case of Mark 16:9–20, the otherwise unknown author of Mark’s Longer Ending made use of the four NT gospels, in order to make his addition to Mark resemble documents that had attained at least some level of esteem in certain Christian communities.\footnote{Compare, e.g., Luke 8:2b with Mark 16:9b; Mark 6:12 and Luke 9:6 with Mark 16:20a, and see \textit{K. Kelhoffer, Miracle and Mission} (see n. 18), 48–156. On the reason this Markan appendix was composed, namely to follow the narrative that ends abruptly at Mark 16:8, see \textit{Miracle and Mission} (see n. 18), 157–169, 238–244.} The author of this Markan ending wrote around 120–150 C.E., after a collection (but not necessarily a fixed ‘canon’) of the NT gospels became available and – notably for the present argument concerning the date of Second Clement’s ‘gospel’ citations – before Justin Martyr’s First Apology (ca. 155–161 C.E.).\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, esp. 169–177. The \textit{terminus post quem} for Mark 16:9–20 is set by this author’s use of material from the four NT Gospels, which presumably were not collected prior to ca. 110–120 C.E. The \textit{terminus ante quem} is established by Justin Martyr’s knowledge of Mark 16:20a in 1 Apol. 45.5. Thus, the Longer Ending predates Justin, but the earliest possible date for its composition, namely some point after which the NT Gospels had been written and collected, cannot be ascertained exactly. Cf. Irenaeus, Haer. III.10.5, citing Mark 16:19 as a part of Mark’s gospel.} That is to say, prior to Justin Martyr the four NT gospels were available in one place for the author of Mark’s Longer Ending. The author of this secondary addition to Mark wanted to forge an authentic-looking passage by means of epitomizing other gospel pericopes that presumably would have been familiar to his or her audience. Thus, Mark 16:9–20 points to a \textit{collection} of (at least) four gospels before this passage was cited by Justin Martyr.\footnote{In his \textit{Habilitationsschrift}, T. K. Heckel, \textit{Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium}, WUNT 120, Tübingen 1999, 283–285, came to the same conclusion independently, arguing a similar point in the case of John 21 as well.}
As a result, the testimony of Mark 16:9–20 dismisses Koester’s criterion (cited above) to support dating Second Clement after Marcion to the mid-second century or, in Koester’s words, “probably even later.” Knowledge of a NT gospel is simply not a reliable basis for dating Second Clement after Marcion. Thus, although the date of Second Clement remains an open question, it is to be noted that the two main arguments used to support a later date for Second Clement are unreliable. That posed by Koester – use of written ‘gospel’ materials – does not take into the account the witness of Mark 16:9–20 (or John 21), which predates Justin. Additionally, Second Clement cannot be identified with a lost letter of Bishop Soter of Rome (166–174 C.E.) because this work is patently not a letter.41 Given that there were rather early second-century collections – but, again, not necessarily fixed ‘canons’ – of gospel writings, what can be learned about a writing like Second Clement, whose author cites a variety of gospel materials, once in conjunction with the term εὐαγγέλιον (2 Clem. 8:5)?

4. Analysis of 2 Clem. 8:5

The last remaining, and perhaps the most intriguing, passage of Second Clement to be discussed in this section is 2 Clem. 8:5, the only place this author uses the term εὐαγγέλιον. As noted above, Koester acknowledges correctly that there is “some proof for the use of the term ‘gospel’ as a designation of written documents.”42 Significantly, this singular occurrence refers to written ‘gospel’ material. As in 2 Clem. 4:5, 11:2 and 12:2, extracanonical material is cited in 2 Clem. 8:5, introduced with the affirmation of what the Lord “says in the gospel” (λέγει γὰρ ὁ κύριος ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ).

The attribution in 2 Clem. 8:5 is significant to the present inquiry for at least three reasons. First, despite the myriad of gospel traditions cited in Second Clement (both ‘canonical’ and ‘extracanonical’), 2 Clem. 8:5 uses


42 With Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 17, although Koester suggests that in Second Clement “the evidence is somewhat ambiguous” (18). Cf. the following section on 2 Clem. 8:5 (λέγει γὰρ ὁ κύριος ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ).
the singular for the term ‘gospel.’ Although acknowledging the possibility, Koester thinks it “highly unlikely that ‘a sayings collection’” drawing upon Matthew, Luke and “some non-canonical materials … was called a ‘gospel’” by the author of Second Clement. Koester offers no argument for this position, which can plausibly be discarded as special pleading for the originality of Marcion’s innovative use of this term.

A second interpretive issue pertaining to 2 Clem. 8:5 concerns a point of similarity with Marcion’s ‘gospel.’ As with Marcion’s use of εὐαγγέλιον, the lack of explanation in 2 Clem. 8:5 about the use of the term “gospel” in reference to a writing is noteworthy, for the author of Second Clement likewise assumes that his use of this term is intelligible to his audience. Indeed, these two authors’ uses of εὐαγγέλιον designating a writing are assumed to be perspicuous. Thus, the lack of specificity by both Marcion and the author of Second Clement suggests the likelihood that neither author was an innovator in using εὐαγγέλιον to designate a written gospel. Since neither Marcion nor the author of Second Clement gives any indication of trying to broaden the meaning of εὐαγγέλιον, it is plausible that whatever writing is cited in 2 Clem. 8:5 had already received this title by an earlier author, redactor or copyist of this extracanonical ‘gospel’ material. The same inference could apply equally to the copy of Luke known to Marcion. If this were the case for both documents – Marcion’s Luke and Second Clement’s (sayings) source – then in contradistinction to N. T. Wright’s earlier cited criteria, εὐαγγέλιον in these very early witnesses would likely not be an indication of specific contents – and certainly not of ‘proto-orthodoxy’ – but would only designate some written collection of teachings from or about Jesus. Such a designation would likely have arisen from the need of an author or copyist to distinguish one useful, and only possibly authoritative, writing from other esteemed literature (for example, the LXX or perhaps one or more of Paul’s letters; cf. 2Pet 3:15b–16).

A third point of interpretation concerning the temporal priority of Second Clement to Marcion could perhaps be pressed a step further. In 2 Clem. 8:5, εὐαγγέλιον is used in a context devoid of debate about authoritative writings or canon. That is to say, there is no influence of the Marcionite debate in Second Clement. Rather, Second Clement reveals an author who drew freely from a variety of sources without concern for

---

43 Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 18.
44 So M. Hengel, “The Titles of the Gospels,” in idem, Studies in the Gospel of Mark, London 1985, 64–84. 72. Koester, however, is appropriately cautious on this point, although he grants that the names of the evangelists may well have circulated earlier (Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 26–27).
45 See above on Wright, “When Is a Gospel Not a Gospel?” (see n. 1), 67–75.
canon, authority, or inappropriate editing by later ‘Judaizing’ Christians, all of which received greater attention after Marcion.46

The thesis argued heretofore in this subsection, that at approximately the same time in the second quarter of the second century both Marcion and Second Clement assume εὐαγγέλιον as a referent for written gospel materials, calls into question Koester’s, von Campenhausen’s and Gundry’s characterization of Marcion as an innovator. It has also been noted that in 2 Clem. 8:5 the designation εὐαγγέλιον refers not to a ‘NT’ gospel but to some other writing, which may well have been called a ‘gospel’ by its author, compiler, redactor or copyist before it was cited in Second Clement. The following subsections will argue that, in addition to the witnesses of Marcion and Second Clement, similar uses of εὐαγγέλιον are also to be found in materials incorporated into the Didache, which offers yet another witness to an early-second century author who assumes εὐαγγέλιον as a term for written gospel material.47

5. εὐαγγέλιον in Didache 8:2 as a Window to the Origin of “Gospel” as a Literary Designation

As Christopher M. Tuckett aptly observes, since the Didache is a composite document – comprising Wisdom teaching about the Two Ways (Did. 1:1–6:2), instructions for community leaders (6:3–15:4) and a brief section of eschatological and ethical warnings (16:1–8) – source-critical matters pertaining to each part of this writing must be studied independently of the other parts. Thus, conclusions pertaining to the use of ‘gospel’ materials in one section of the Didache may not necessarily hold for the others.48 The

46 If Second Clement is indeed later than Marcion, this is not what one would expect from an author concerned with the unity of Christians who need to heed the warnings of the presbyters against false teachings (cf. 2 Clem. 17:2–3). Given this author’s eclectic use of gospel materials – or use of a written ‘gospel’ comprising eclectic traditions – it stands to reason that the author of Second Clement would have had objections to the narrower Marcionite canon if he had known about it. The silence of Second Clement on this point thus offers a supporting argument for the chronological priority of this writing to Marcion’s ‘gospel.’

47 See further KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 149–160.

analysis to follow is concerned primarily with the occurrence of εὐαγγέλιον in Did. 8:2 (cf. 11:3–4 and 15:3–4).

The passage in question contains materials about hypocrisy, prayer, and fasting that parallel parts of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Did. 8:2; cf. Matt 6:1–18, esp. vv. 9–13). Contrary to Kurt Niederwimmer’s conclusion that “[t]he jury is still out” on whether the Didache “refers to a gospel in written form (evangelium scriptum),” in what follows I will side with Clayton N. Jefford, arguing that the Didachist does indeed designate a written document in these passages, and as such offers the earliest surviving witness to the use of εὐαγγέλιον to designate a written ‘gospel’ of some kind.

In Did. 8:2 the author substantiates his message about prayer with an appeal to Jesus’ teaching “as the Lord has commanded in his Gospel” (ὡς ἐκέλευσεν ὁ κύριος ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ αὐτοῦ). The Didachist offers this introduction to some traditional material, which coincides, with minor variations, with the Matthean Lord’s Prayer. Differences between the Didache and the Matthean Lord’s Prayer may be summarized as follows:

1. The presence of οὖν ... ὑμῖν in Matthew’s introduction.
2. Matthew’s plural (ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) and the Didache’s singular (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ) for “heaven.”
3. Again, Matthew’s plural (τὰ ὀφειλήματα, “debts, obligations”) and the Didache’s singular of a related term (τὴν ὀφειλήν, “debt, obligation, duty”).
4. Matthew’s perfect (ἀφήκαμεν) and the Didache’s present (ἀφίεμεν) tense for ἀφίημι, “forgive.”
5. The doxology concluding the Lord’s Prayer in the Didache: “for yours is the power and the glory forever.”

Clearly the Didache’s prayer cannot be traced to either Luke 11:2–4 or Q>Lk. The rather minor differences between Matt 6:9–13 and Did. 8:2 concern a small omission (Matthew’s οὖν ... ὑμεῖς) in light of Matt 6:5a; two instances of different forms of the same word (“heaven” and “forgive”); and a single example of a different form of a similar word (ὁφειλήματα: “debts, obligations”; ὀφειλή: “debt, obligation, duty”). Moreover, the presence of a doxology at the end of Did. 8:2 does not speak directly to the question of a possible literary relationship between the two texts. I have argued in greater detail elsewhere that at each point the numerous similarities suggest the likelihood that the Didachist used either Matthew or a pre-Matthean source.50 Such use of written material supports the conclusion that in Did. 8:2 the term εὐαγγέλιον designates a writing of some kind.

50 See KELHOFFER, “How Soon a Book” (see n. 16), 17–22.
Yet Koester, in his discussion of Did. 8:2, confuses two different questions, namely whether the NT gospel of Matthew is cited in Did. 8:2 and whether some writing is cited as εὐαγγέλιον in Did. 8:2. Whatever their merit, Koester’s arguments concerning the former question do not speak directly to the latter. One may ask, moreover, whether it makes better sense to infer the Didachist’s use, with small modifications, of Matthew (a known entity) than to hypothesise another otherwise unknown source or writing so markedly like Matthew but not Matthew. That is, one logically needs to show that the citations in Didache cannot be explained on the hypothesis of using Matthew, before one can credibly postulate the existence (and use) of another gospel source. In the case of Did. 8:2, there is no good reason to multiply hypothetical sources when known sources plausibly explain the data. As a result, it is more likely that the Didachist made use of Matthew than either a pre-Matthean source or some later writing based upon the first NT gospel.

As was noted in the cases of Marcion and Second Clement’s uses of εὐαγγέλιον, moreover, it is noteworthy that at no point in Did. 8:2 (cf. 11:3–4 and 15:3–4) does this author suggest that any of his uses of εὐαγγέλιον represents an innovation. Rather, the Didachist assumes that his audience has some familiarity with the Lord’s Prayer, cited in Did. 8:2. Accordingly, the metamorphosis of the term εὐαγγέλιον is not to be found within the Didache either. Since the Didachist used a written ‘gospel,’ probably Matthew, and assumed that εὐαγγέλιον was a recognizable term also for this audience, it follows that Matthew (or a writing very similar to the canonical Matthew) had already received this designation before Matthew was known to the Didachist. That numerous other Christian writers before Marcion and Justin Martyr did not use εὐαγγέλιον to refer to a written gospel suggests that the Didache could attest a local phenomenon in which this particular gospel had gained popularity.

---

51 Against KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 16, who begs the question of the popularity of a particular version of the Lord’s Prayer in the early church: “It is also most unlikely that a Christian writer would have to copy from any written source in order to quote the Lord’s Prayer.” Cf. IDEM, Synoptische Überlieferung (see n. 26), 103–109. There is no evidence that the assorted moral exhortations of Matt 5–7 or of the Didachist were actually put into practice by many in the early church. On the contrary, the instruction of Did. 8:2 is given because of the Didachist’s view of how the faithful should – but apparently are not – praying as they should. It is precisely for this reason that the Lord’s ‘commandment’ in ‘the gospel’ is cited at length, because the Didachist believed that his audience needed this information, or at least a reminder of it.

52 Similar arguments are offered above for Marcion’s copy of Luke and the written ‘gospel’ cited in Second Clement.
6. Early Christian References to εὐαγγέλιον prior to the Didache

Since the Didache, Second Clement and Marcion assume “gospel” as a literary designation, perhaps it will be helpful to look at writings that were eventually called ‘gospels’ for a clue about the term by which these writings were to be known. In Mark εὐαγγέλιον occurs seven times in five passages (Mark 1:1, 14–15; 8:35; 10:29–30a; 14:9). Mark uses εὐαγγέλιον in the opening line of his work (1:1), with reference to the preaching by Jesus (1:14, 15) and others (13:10; 14:9), and as a cause for the persecution of Jesus’ followers (10:29–30a; 13:10). Udo Schnelle takes the distinctiveness of these Markan passages to indicate that “Mark created this new genre” of gospel literature.53 Against connecting the term εὐαγγέλιον with an allegedly new genre is the observation that four of the seven occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in Mark refer to oral proclamation and not to a writing of any kind (Mark 1:14, 15; 13:10; 14:9). At two other points (10:29–30a; 13:10) the content of ‘the gospel’ is not specified, but it is doubtful that those enduring hardship “because of Jesus and the gospel” are persecuted for their possession of a ‘book’ or scroll. The remaining passage, Mark 1:1, introduces Mark’s work but does not make an explicit claim about (a new!) literary genre.54

Furthermore, the term “gospel” never occurs in Luke (thus presumably also “L”) or, for that matter, in the Fourth Gospel. Thus, although the author of Luke incorporated so much material from Mark into his first volume, he either did not recognize Mark’s redactional uses of εὐαγγέλιον or did not consider this alleged Markan innovation to be worthy of imitation. The only two occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in Acts also support this point about the author of Luke’s (understandably) not recognizing in Mark εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation.55 In the case of Matthew, the term occurs four times, always within the context of oral proclamation and


54 With HENGEL, The Four Gospels and the One Gospel (see n. 17), 93–96; and KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 14: “Mark 1:1 says that the proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection began with the preaching of John the Baptist and with Jesus’ own call for repentance. Thus there is no indication whatsoever that … Mark … thought that ‘gospel’ would be an appropriate title for the literature they produced.”

55 The speech attributed to Peter in Acts 15:7 designates hearing “the word of the gospel” (τὸν λόγον τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). Moreover, in Acts 20:24 Paul’s bearing witness to “the gospel of God’s grace” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ) also suggests an oral context rather than the presentation of a document by this itinerant evangelist.
in connection with the verb κηρύσσω. A similar kerygmatic context is to be noted for the occurrence of εὐαγγέλιον in the secondary ‘Longer Ending’ of Mark. Therefore, neither Mark nor the first-known interpreters of Mark (the authors of Matthew, Luke and Mark 16:9–20) can be credited with expanding the definition of εὐαγγέλιον to designate a writing.

Accordingly, the preceding overview of εὐαγγέλιον in the NT Gospels and Acts brings us to a numinous period between the composition of at least two of the Synoptics (Mark and, later, Matthew) and the writing of the Didache for the terminus a quo this section has been seeking to identify. The Didache’s witness to Matthew assumes, of course, the prior existence of Mark. The most likely explanation for the findings offered heretofore is that a reader or copyist of Mark and Matthew (mis)interpreted Mark’s ἄρχη τοῦ εὐγγέλιου (1:1) as a literary designation and applied εὐαγγέλιον also to Matthew. This reader of two early ‘gospels’ is most probably to be distinguished from the Didachist, since there is no compelling evidence for the use of Mark in the Didache.

Although an exact date cannot be ascertained for this development, it must have occurred rather shortly after the composition of Matthew, given its early attestation in the Didache. Since the date of Matthew itself can only be placed between the times of Mark and the Didache, the development of εὐαγγέλιον designating a writing must too be situated within this range. Furthermore, neither the anonymous reader of Mark and Matthew nor the Didachist seems to have associated the name “Matthew” with the name that came to be associated with this NT gospel.

56 Two of the four occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in Matthew are drawn from Mark, and the other two are expansions of Markan material. Matt 24:14 (κηρυχθήσεται τοῦ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας; cf. Mark 13:10) and Matt 26:13 (ὅπου ἐὰν κηρυχθῇ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ; cf. Mark 14:9) stem from Mark. Additionally, Matt 4:23 (κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας; cf. Mark 1:39) and Matt 9:35b (κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας; cf. Mark 6:6b) are redactional expansions of Mark. Thus, the term εὐαγγέλιον most probably did not occur in “M” or, given its absence in Luke, in “Q.” This analysis stands in counterpoint to G. N. STANTON, “Matthew: Βίβλος, Εὐαγγέλιον, or Βίος?” in The Four Gospels, 1992, BETL 100, ed. F. Van Segbroeck et al., FS Frans Neirynck, Leuven 1992, 2:1187–2001, esp. 1188–1195, at 1188, who argues “that the evidence … points more clearly to Matthew than either to Marcion or to Mark as the innovator in the use of εὐαγγέλιον for a written account of the story and significance of Jesus.” Stanton does not argue persuasively that the author of Matthew uses εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation or that this author assumes his audience’s familiarity with such a use of εὐαγγέλιον.

57 Mark 16:15b: κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει. Cf. KELHOFFER, Miracle and Mission (see n. 18), 97–100.

58 Cf. above on COLLINS, Mark (see n. 14), 3.

59 The naming of this gospel’s supposedly apostolic author thus appears to have been a subsequent development, although it could have stemmed from Matt 9:9, 10:3. This
7. Conclusions: εὐαγγέλιον as a Reference to ‘Gospel’ Materials in the First Half of the Second Century

This section has addressed the questions of when and how εὐαγγέλιον became a literary designation in the first half of the second century and observed that the Didachist, the author of Second Clement, and Marcion all assume the term εὐαγγέλιον as a reference to written ‘gospel’ materials. Since none of these second-century Christian authors clarifies an allegedly novel use of εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation rather than a reference to oral proclamation, none of them can plausibly be construed as an innovator in this regard. Rather, since none of these authors defines what they mean by εὐαγγέλιον when clearly referring to a written gospel, the innovation in the use of this term is better traced to the documents known to them – Marcion’s copy of Luke, Second Clement’s eclectic collection of gospel materials, and the edition of Matthew used in the Didache’s instructions for community leaders (Did. 6:3–15:4). Accordingly, the earliest use of εὐαγγέλιον to designate a written ‘gospel’ must have arisen before the Didache, Second Clement, and Marcion.

The main point at issue in this section has concerned H. F. von Campenhausen, H. Koester and R. H. Gundry’s thesis for the novelty of Marcion’s role in redefining the term εὐαγγέλιον as Christian scripture. Nonetheless, there is much to be said for aspects of the work of von Campenhausen, Koester and Gundry. In particular, these scholars are correct to highlight the incalculable influence of Marcion’s canon on subsequent (proto-)orthodox conceptions of canon and esteemed scripture. Up to a point one may agree with von Campenhausen that “the idea and the reality of the Christian Bible were the work of Marcion, and the Church which rejected his work, so far from being ahead of him in this field, from a formal point of view simply followed his example.” Yet questions about canon, on the one hand, and εὐαγγέλιον designating either an esteemed document or (part of a) canon, on the other, need to be distinguished inso-

\[ \text{terminus ante quem might perhaps be assigned to Papias’ testimony (ca. 110–120 C.E.) concerning an originally ‘Hebrew’ gospel of Matthew (apud Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.39.16), although Papias refers to the sayings (τὰ λόγια) and not a written ‘gospel’ by the author of ‘Matthew.’ Cf. KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 33; SCHNELLE, History and Theology (see n. 53), 219. Pace KOESTER, Ancient Christian Gospels (see n. 17), 26–27, who criticizes M. Hengel’s argument that the gospel titles were as early as the early second century; Koester considers it possible that the names may well have circulated at this early point.} \]

\[ 60 \text{So also now COLLINS, Mark (see n. 14), 129 (on Mark 1:1).} \]

\[ 61 \text{VON CAMPENHAUSEN, Formation (see n. 20), 148, summarizing arguments presented in IDEM, “Marcion et les origines du Canon Néotestamentaire,” RHPR 46 (1966), 213–226.} \]
far as it is possible. In light of Arthur J. Bellinzoni’s observation that “[m]odern studies of the development of the New Testament canon tend to divide the second century into two parts: the period before Marcion, and the period between Marcion and Irenaeus (or the Muratorian Canon),” the present essay calls for nuancing this distinction and for a fresh assessment of Christian literature before and roughly contemporary with Marcion.

However much scholars may wish to pursue a diachronic analysis, the search for definitive points of development may not always be met with exacting success. The preceding analysis has shown that the eventual naming of documents about Jesus’ life and teachings as “gospels” did not follow a linear process of development from the 70s to the 140s C.E. Nor did a uniform shift in the meaning of εὐαγγέλιον occur either during this period, or, as A. Y. Reed notes in the case of Irenaeus, later in the second century.

Organized diachronically, the arguments offered in this section may be summarized as follows:

1. Mark 1:1 (ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου) offers a title, but not a designation of literary genre, for this writing. The authors of Luke and John never use the term εὐαγγέλιον in their works, and in Matthew (4:23; 9:35b; 24:14; 26:13) the term is only used in connection with oral proclamation (κηρύσσω).

2. At some point between the composition of Matthew and the writing of the Didache, the term εὐαγγέλιον came to be associated with Matthew’s writing. Likewise, during roughly the same period, or shortly afterward, the title εὐαγγέλιον was added to the collection of ‘gospel’ materials later used by the author of Second Clement and to (possibly, a prototype of) a copy of Luke that Marcion eventually edited.

2’. Mark 16:9–20 (ca. 120–150 C.E.) points to the existence of collections of written ‘gospel’ materials in the first half of the second century (that is, before Justin Martyr). Accordingly, the harmonized gospel citations in Second Clement do not support dating Second Clement after Marcion.

3. The Didachist assumes (and thus did not invent) εὐαγγέλιον as an appropriate term for citing and referring to written ‘gospel’ materials that reflect Matthean redaction (Did. 8:2; cf. 11:3–4 and 15:3–4).

4. The author of Second Clement, like the Didachist, assumes that his audience knows to what εὐαγγέλιον refers. Second Clement cites a variety of written ‘gospel’ ma-

---


63 As A. Y. REED, “Εὐαγγέλιον: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus’ Adversus Haereses,” VC 56 (2002), 11–46, notes, Irenaeus occasionally employs εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation, but the majority of his uses of this term include the traditional kerygmatic element.

64 It has not been argued (or disputed) that the Didachist made use of Matthew as part of a larger gospel collection. Moreover, the dates of Second Clement and the Didache remain areas requiring further examination.
Gospel’ as a Literary Title in Early Christianity

5. As von Campenhausen, Koester and Gundry rightly observe, Marcion represents an important turning point in the second century. Marcion did not create εὐαγγέλιον as a literary designation. Yet his designating one writing, Luke, by this term implicitly excludes this term and status for other gospels, and, as a result, ignited a debate that resulted in responses that would prove formative for the later church.

6. Justin Martyr offers the first surviving reference to written ‘gospels’ in the plural (ἄκαλεῖται εὐαγγελία, 1 Apol. 66.3), thus denoting a collection of writings, each merits the name ‘gospel’ and a place within an emerging body of esteemed literature.

7. Only later in the second century does Irenaeus reject ‘gospels’ other than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and claim that Christ the Word gave to the Church “the gospel in four parts.”

The series of developments outlined above was by no means an organized or sequential progression that had an immediate or pervasive effect throughout second-century Christian communities. Nor were these developments the subject of wide discussion or interest, let alone unanimity, in the second century. Such a development is the legacy of Marcion, built upon the musings of an unknown reader or copyist of Mark and Matthew and foreshadowed in the meditations of the Didachist and the author of Second Clement.

C. The So-Called Gospel of Basilides and the Question of the Scholarly “Canon” of Extracanonical Gospels

The previous section called attention to the difficulties that scholars have had in defining the term “gospel” in early Christianity and its eventual emergence – after the composition of Mark and Matthew, but before the Didache, Second Clement and Marcion – as a literary designation for gospel literature. The very fact that so much scholarly effort has been devoted to a subject that has spawned considerable confusion should give one pause concerning the related question of what should and should not be called a “gospel.” Whereas it is not helpful (à la N. T. Wright) to make arbitrary theological distinctions the basis for classifying gospel literature, it is equally problematic to grant the designation “gospel” to any extracan-

---

65 Gk.: τετράμορφον τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, Haer. III.11.8. In this passage, τετράμορφον is a predicate, not an attributive, adjective. The phrase is thus not to be translated as “the four-formed Gospel” (so Reed, “Εὐαγγέλιον” (see n. 63), 11). Reed’s fine study (“Εὐαγγέλιον,” 19) notes correctly, however, Irenaeus’ hesitation to refer to εὐαγγέλια in the plural: “Irenaeus uses εὐαγγέλιον ... 101 times in the five books of Adversus haereses. Of these, only seven occurrences are plural (2.22.3; 3.11.7, 11.8 [twice], 11.9 [thrice]).”
nonical writing that touches upon Jesus or his teaching. As mentioned above, the present essay addresses only a portion of this larger question concerning the so-called Gospel of Basilides.

The paucity of evidence and contradictory nature of the patristic witnesses to Basilides have not stopped several prominent 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 7:6a–b.66 Von Campenhausen likewise exemplifies this position concerning Basilides’s allegedly having composed a work known as a “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον): “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.”67 Walter Bauer, Gerhard May, Everett Procter, Werner Foerster and Andrew F. Gregory concur that Basilides did in fact write a gospel.68

In addition to the claim that Basilides wrote a gospel, numerous other scholars characterize Basilides as a Christian teacher who wrote a gospel commentary. For instance, in an important monograph devoted to Basilides and his followers, Winrich A. Löhr argues concerning Basilides and his son and disciple Isidore:

Basilides … kommentierte eine selbst erstellte Evangelienrezension in 24 Büchern; … So kann man in düren Worten das Wesentliche an biographischen Informationen über Basilides und Isidor zusammenfassen. Basilides und Isidor werden damit als christliche Lehrer in die erste Hälfte des 2. Jahrhunderts eingeordnet.…69

---

67 VON CAMPENHAUSEN, Formation (see n. 20), 139 n. 161; cf. 139 n. 158.
69 LöHR, Basilides und seine Schule (see n. 68), 325–326. Löhr also writes, “Wir vermuteten, daß die Evangelienrezension des Basilides seinem Kommentar als der Text bei-
As the preceding citation of Löhr denotes, the claim of having written a gospel commentary of course presupposes that in the first half of the second century Basilides utilized gospel materials, including (if not primarily) written ones. Löhr is not the only reputable scholar to make such a claim, however. Others, including Theodor Zahn, Hans Windisch, Joseph C. Ayer, Robert M. Grant, Bentley Layton, Everett Procter, M. J. Edwards, Christoph Markschies and Birger A. Pearson, likewise characterize Basilides as an exegete of gospel materials, and sometimes of other Christian scripture as well.

I have offered elsewhere a critical assessment of these two claims about Basilides’s gospel and gospel commentary, arguing that if a writing of Basilides ever did receive the designation “gospel,” it was not a narrative or sayings gospel concerned primarily with the life and teachings of Jesus. A brief review of the most pertinent components in this judgment will illustrate the caution needed against too quickly opening the scholarly ‘canon’ of gospel literature to writings, such as those of Basilides, for which the designation is not a good fit.

I. Did Basilides Write a Gospel?

As mentioned above, although von Campenhausen is cautious concerning what can be known about the content of Basilides’s gospel, he is nonetheless persuaded that such a writing circulated with the title εὐαγγέλιον.

gegeben war, auf den sich der Kommentar bezog. Dieser Kommentar … behandelte eher anhand einer Perikope ein theologisches Thema” (329; cf. 12. 34. 215).


71 Several of the following points are argued in greater detail in J. KELHOFFER, “Basilides’s Gospel and Exegetica (Treatises),” VC 59 (2005), 115–134.

72 See above on VON CAMPENHAUSEN, Formation (see n. 20), 139 n. 161.
Von Campenhausen bases this inference on the following testimony of Agrippa Castor *apud* Eusebius of Caesarea: “In expounding his [Basilides’s] mysteries he [Castor] says that he [Basilides] compiled twenty-four books on [or: into] the gospel (φησὶν αὐτὸν εἰς ... τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τέσσαρα ... ἔκκοι ὑπεντάξαι βιβλία)” (Hist. eccl. 4.7.7; cf. 4.7.4–6). Accordingly, von Campenhausen’s inference, which numerous other scholars follow, rests upon the reliability of Eusebius.

The question whether Hist. eccl. 4.7.7 claims that Basilides compiled gospel materials (especially from other written 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 (τὰ λογία συνετάξατο) in the Hebrew 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 (standard) 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 about ‘the Gospel.’

The surviving fragments of Basilides’s work (the ‘Treatises’ or Exegetica), however, cannot be used to support the accuracy of the testimony of Agrippa Castor (or at least Eusebius’s portrayal of it). Moreover, it would be mistaken to infer, as Löhr does, that, in the absence of polemic against Basilides, this testimony is to be regarded as trustworthy: “Die Information über den Evangelienkommentar ... folgt keiner erkennbaren polemischen Tendenz und macht daher einen zuverlässigen Eindruck.”

It thus follows that von Campenhausen’s and others’ basing an inference upon Agrippa Castor’s uncorroborated testimony (Hist. eccl. 4.7.7), that Basilides’s ‘gospel’ was known as τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, is at best tenuous.

Moreover, the possibility must be acknowledged that Eusebius may ultimately be responsible for the *opinio communis* that Basilides wrote a gospel.

---

73 BDAG, 974 (s.v. συντάσσω).


75 With LÖHR, *ibid.*, 33; cf. 33–34. 211 on the work of Psalms that Origen elsewhere (Enarrat. Job 21:12) attributes to Basilides.
2. Did Basilides Write a Gospel Commentary?

As noted above, Zahn, Windisch, Ayer, Grant, Layton, Procter, Edwards, Markschies, Löhr and Pearson maintain that Basilides wrote a gospel (or biblical) commentary. The origins of this influential position in scholarship can perhaps be traced to Clement of Alexandria, who uses Exegetica as a title for Basilides’s scantily-preserved work (Gk Ἐξηγητικά [“things exegetical”], Strom. 4.[XII.]81.1). This title may have suggested to subsequent patristic witnesses to Basilides (for example, Origen and Eusebius) – and to later scholars as well – that Basilides was an ‘exegete’ of Christian scripture, although Clement himself does not make such a claim. In contrast to Clement, the Acta Archelai attributes both a different title for this work (‘Treatises’) and the organization into individual books to Basilides himself; it may thus be helpful for future scholarship to refer to Basilides’s work by this title, or at least to include it along with Exegetica.

Yet against this notion of Basilides’s having written such a commentary, it must be noted that two of the three surviving portions of Basilides’s work are not involved primarily with biblical interpretation or ‘exegesis’ of any kind. Rather, they are treatises on Providence (Clem., Strom. 4.[XII.]81–83) and 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 Poor Man (Luke 16:19–31) in Acta Archelai 67.5c, Acta Archelai 67.6–7a suggests that the allegorical interpretation on this parable merely supported Basilides’s dualistic system. It thus follows that the surviving portions of Basilides’s ‘Treatises’ or Exegetica do not support a primary characterization of Basilides’s work as an ‘exegesis’ of Christian scripture or, for that matter, as a commentary of any kind. Nor does the evidence support a characterization of Basilides’s work as one that took scripture as the starting point for the exploration of various theological topics. Against Löhr, ibid., 12–13; cf. 34. 215. 325–326. 329.

76 The original Greek term used by Basilides for his work is open to question. ZAHN, Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons (see n. 70), vol. 1/2:764 suggested ὀμιλία (“homilies”). Two other possibilities are μεταχειρίσεις (or μεταχειρήσεις “pursuits, studies, treatments”) and ψηλαφήσεις (“inquiries, searchings”). Cf. LöHR, Basilides und seine Schule (see n. 68), 226.

77 Against LöHR, ibid., 12–13; cf. 34. 215. 325–326. 329.
bears some resemblance to the ‘narrative’ or ‘explanation’ that Basilides offers in his Treatises (Exegetica).

3. Conclusions

This essay began with questions about the classification of gospel literature and when “gospel” emerged as a literary designation in early Christianity. The final part of the essay has offered a few remarks about Basilides’s modest witness to ‘gospel’ materials in the first half of the second century, calling into question the dubious claim of numerous scholars that Basilides wrote either a gospel or a gospel commentary. Attempts to classify gospel literature and to define the relationship of the NT gospels to their extracanonical counterparts will continue. It has been argued that the way forward in these discussions will avoid both arbitrary (theological) criteria for genre classification and allowing writings such as Basilides’s entrance into the scholarly “canon” of gospels on equally questionable grounds.