8. The Gospels in Early Christian Literature

Murray J. Smith

This chapter examines the important—but complicated—role played by gospel traditions in early Christian literature down to the beginning of the third century. Section A offers a survey of the historical processes by which gospel traditions were transmitted in the early church, and thereby delineates the *forms* in which "the gospel" was known to early Christian writers. Section B then explores some of the ways in which early Christian authors *used* the gospel materials available to them, and offers a case study in the Apostolic Fathers.[1]

A. The One, the Four and the Many: Forms of Gospel Tradition in Early Christianity

The Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (gospel) is used in a variety of ways in the early Christian literature. It can mean:

1. The original message of "good news" preached by, or about, Jesus;
2. Oral traditions which preserve the words and/or deeds of Jesus; or
3. Written texts of various kinds, including the four canonical gospels, which narrate the story of Jesus or preserve sayings attributed to him.

These different shades of meaning reflect the various forms in which early Christian writers knew "the gospel," and highlight the complexity of the processes by which gospel traditions were transmitted in early Christianity. In what follows we trace, first, the way in which the very earliest Christian

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[1] A full history of the reception of each of the four canonical gospels in the early Christian literature is the beyond the scope of this short chapter. For that the reader is referred to more detailed studies. On Matthew: E. Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus Vol. 1: The First Ecclesiastical Writers* (Leuven: Peeters, 1990); M. Simonetti, *Matthew* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001–2002). On Mark: C. C. Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Edinburgh: T. &T. Clark, 1994); T. C. Oden, C. A. Hall, *Mark* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998). On Luke: A. Gregory, *The Reception of Luke and Acts in the Period Before Irenaeus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); A. A. Just, *Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003). On John: T. Nagel, *Die Rezeption des Johannesevangeliums im 2. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000); C. E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

gospel—the apostolic proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord—was augmented by a plurality of written gospel texts (sections A.1 and A.2). Next (in section A.3), we demonstrate how, despite the multiplication of written gospel sources during the second century, the four most ancient written gospels had emerged by the end of the century as the definitive fourfold gospel we know from the New Testament (NT).

1. The One: The Gospel of Apostolic Proclamation

To begin with, it is important to note that in earliest Christianity, there was only *one* gospel (εὐαγγέλιον): the grand announcement made by Jesus that the kingdom of God had arrived;[2] the good news preached by the apostles that God had established his rule by exalting his Son, Jesus the Christ, as Lord.[3] Though this gospel was proclaimed in different ways by a variety of preachers to a range of audiences, the earliest Christians recognized that together they preached only one gospel—that of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.[4]

This earliest Christian use of the term εὐαγγέλιον drew heavily on both the classical and biblical traditions, but was also remarkably distinctive.[5] In classical Greek usage, εὐαγγέλιον originally denoted "that which is proper to the εὐαγγέλος," that is, to the messenger bringing news of victory from the battlefield. The term thus connoted both the reward received by the messenger, and the victory message itself. Later, εὐαγγέλιον came to be used of a range of other "news" announcements, and in the imperial propaganda of the early Roman Empire, the plural εὐαγγέλια was used to refer to the series of "good news" announcements which followed from the fact that that the divine Augustus had established his rule, bringing salvation and peace to the known world.[6] Similarly, in the biblical tradition, the Hebrew verb *basar* (to

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[2] E.g. Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark. 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16.

[3] E.g. Acts 8:12; 10:36; 13:32-33; 17:18; Rom. 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; 2 Cor. 4:1-6; 2 Tim. 2:8.

[4] On the impossibility of there being "another gospel," i.e. a gospel other than the one originally proclaimed, see Gal. 1.6-9; cf. 1 Cor. 15.1-3, 11; 2 Cor. 11.4. For recent and illuminating discussions of the lines of continuity and discontinuity between the gospel preached *by* Jesus, and that preached *about* him, see G. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 9-62; and N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 154-61.

[5] On the origins and use of the of the term εὐαγγέλιον in antiquity see G. Friedrich, "εὐαγγελίζομαι, εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελιστής, προευαγγελίζομαι," in G. Kittel, ed., *TDNT* vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 707-37; cf. D. Dormeyer and H. Frankemölle, "Evangelium als literarischer Gattung und als theologischer Begriff," *ANRW* 2.25.2 (1984), pp. 1543-1704.

[6] For example, the inscription from Priene (9 BC), in the Roman province of Asia, claims that "the birthday of the god (Augustus) was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings (εὐαγγέλια) that have come to men through him." For the full text, see *OGIS* 2.458. For further examples, see A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 366-67; V. Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), nos. 14, 38, 41, 98, 99. A more detailed study of the use of εὐαγγέλιον and its cognates in the immediate historical context of earliest Christianity is offered by W. Horbury, "'Gospel' in Herodian Judaea," in M. Bockmuehl, D. A. Hagner, eds., *The*

announce) was, in the Greek Septuagint, regularly translated by εὐαγγελίζομαι (or sometimes εὐαγγελίζω),[7] and at several points this verb refers to the announcement of God's victory over his enemies, or to the proclamation of the coming kingdom of YHWH.[8] Thus, in both the classical and biblical traditions, a εὐαγγέλιον was an announcement of "news," a proclamation of an important message.[9]

In this context it is easy to see why the earliest Christians employed a term so filled with theological and political significance to express what they believed God had achieved in Christ.[10] It is striking, however, that although the εὐαγγέλ- root appears more than one hundred times in the NT, the plural εὐαγγέλια is entirely absent: in the earliest Christian understanding there was—and indeed could only ever be—one gospel that really mattered, the gospel of what God had achieved by his Son.[11]

Moreover, it is significant that this most ancient Christian gospel was neither Mark, nor "Q," nor *Thomas*, nor, indeed, any written text. This most ancient Christian gospel was an *oral* proclamation, an *announcement* of good news. Thus, in the NT, the noun εὐαγγέλιον is consistently coupled with verbs such as κηρύσσω (proclaim),[12] καταγγέλλω (announce),[13] ἀναγγέλλω (report),[14] διαμαρτύρομαι (testify),[15] λαλέω (speak),[16] and ἀκούω (hear),[17] so that in each case it is clear that verbal proclamation is on view. And similarly, the verb εὐαγγελίζω (to bring/proclaim good news), which customarily denotes oral annunciation,[18] appears fifty-two times in the NT in connection with the Christian message.[19] In the very earliest period, then, there was only one Christian εὐαγγέλιον; and it was not a written text but an announcement of good news, a spoken message which was "proclaimed" and "heard" rather than written and read.

Written Gospel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 7-30.

[7] E.g. 1 Kgs. 1:42; Jer. 20:15; cf. 2 Sam. 4:10; 2 Kgs. 7:9; 2 Sam. 18:19-33.

[8] Ps. 40:9; 68:11; 96:2; Isa. 40:9; 27; 52:7 (cf. Nah. 2:1 = Eng. 1:15); 61:1.

[9] cf. J. P. Dickson, "Gospel as News: εὐαγγελ- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul," *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005), pp. 212-30.

[10] On the earliest Christian use of εὐαγγέλιον, see especially Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 9-62.

[11] For this language, see Rom. 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thess. 2:2, 8, 9; 1 Pet. 4:17.

[12] Matt. 4:23, 9:35, 24:14, 26:13; Mark 1:14, 13:10, 14:9, 16:15; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:9; cf. the noun κήρυγμα (preaching/proclamation) at Rom. 16:25.

[13] 1 Cor. 9:14.

[14] 1 Pet. 1:12.

[15] Acts 20:24.

[16] 1 Thess. 2:2, 4.

[17] Acts 15:7; Eph. 1:13 (cf. Col. 1:5); Col. 1:23.

[18] *BDAG*, p. 401.

[19] See Matt. 11:5; Luke 1:19; 2:10; 3:18; 4:18, 43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 5:42; 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18; Rom. 1:15; 10:15; 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:16; 9:18; 1 Cor. 15:1; 2 Cor. 10:16; 11:7; Gal. 1:8-9, 11, 16, 23; 4:13; Eph. 2:17; 3:8; Heb. 4:2, 6; 1 Pet. 1:12, 25; 4:6; Rev. 14:6.

2. The Many: A Plurality of Written Gospels

Remarkably quickly, however, the oral proclamation of the one gospel came to be supplemented by a plurality of written "Jesus narratives," which in turn developed into what we know as the four canonical gospels. Luke, for example, writing his Gospel probably somewhere between AD 60 and 85, could already refer to the plurality of written gospel sources available to him:

> Since many (πολλοί) have undertaken to set down an orderly account (ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν) of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on (παρέδοσαν) to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants (αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται) of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.[20]

Luke's introduction hints at two distinct but complementary processes by which memories of Jesus were preserved in the earliest period: it seems that he had access not only to "many" written accounts but also to the oral testimony of surviving eyewitnesses.[21] It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the complex inter-relationship between the oral proclamation of the gospel and the crafting of written accounts to augment its propagation. It is enough to note here that the evolution of written gospels probably proceeded in four overlapping phases:[22]

1. Initial Oral Phase (AD 33–90)—eyewitness testimony about Jesus was preserved in oral form amongst the earliest Christian communities, probably under the names of specified individuals who guaranteed its authenticity.[23]
2. Written Gospel Sources (AD 40–70)—oral eyewitness testimony about Jesus was committed to writing in works that became the first Christian gospel sources. This quite probably occurred under the supervision of the apostles themselves, the gospel sources being designed for use in the four apostolic missions of James, John, Paul, and Peter (see further section A.3.d below). Probably the Gospel of Mark (at least in its earliest form), and perhaps the hypothetical sources "Q," "proto-Matthew" and "proto-Luke" belong to this phase.
3. Canonical Gospels (AD 60–100)—the evangelists (at least Matthew,

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[20] Luke 1:1-4.

[21] For discussion of this point, see R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 21-38, 116-24.

[22] The scheme presented here reflects a broad scholarly consensus about the origins and evolution of the written gospels, which has been widely accepted since the nineteenth century. For more detailed discussion, see D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 77-133.

[23] See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, who argues persuasively that the four canonical gospels "embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses" of Jesus' life (p. 6).

Luke and John) used these earlier written sources (as well as oral sources) to construct their own gospels in narrative-biographical form[24]—the gospels we know from the NT.[25]

4. "Apocryphal" Gospels (after AD 100)—various other authors later used the range of written and oral sources available to them to compose additional gospels, which vary significantly in style and content (see further A.3.a).[26]

For our purposes, the key point to note is that this augmentation of the oral gospel, first by written gospel sources of various kinds ("Q"?, "proto-Luke"? and "proto-Matthew"?), and then by the canonical and apocryphal gospels, constituted a two-fold development in the early Christian understanding of the gospel. On the one hand, εὐαγγέλιον came to refer not only to oral proclamation but also to certain written texts; on the other hand, it came to be used not only in connection with the singular apostolic gospel but also as a title for a plurality of gospel sources.

(a) From Oral to Written

First, then, in early Christian usage the term εὐαγγέλιον came, relatively quickly, to refer not only to oral proclamation, but also to certain written texts used to augment the activity of "gospelling." This new usage of εὐαγγέλιον probably took its lead from Mark 1.1, which refers to "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). Although in Mark the phrase functions as a kind of heading for the prologue (or even for the Gospel as a whole), εὐαγγέλιον still most probably refers to the "content rather than the (literary) form of the book."[27] Nevertheless, Mark's use of εὐαγγέλιον in this context seems to have provided the model and impetus for the identification of other written works as "gospels." Indeed, as Martin

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[24] Despite the tendency of older scholarship to classify the canonical gospels as a *sui generis*, a new and unique kind of literature, more recent studies have demonstrated that the gospels are best understood as a sub-genre of ancient Hellenistic biography (βίος). See especially, R. A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

[25] The dates of composition of the four canonical gospels are debated. The range assigned here reflects that accepted by most scholars. It is quite possible however, that the four canonical gospels should all be dated to the beginning of this period (i.e. before AD 70). For the arguments, see especially J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), pp. 86-117, 254-312; cf. the early dates assigned to the Synoptic Gospels by J. W. Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), p. 238-44, (Matthew c. AD 42; Mark c. AD 45; Luke c. AD 50–55).

[26] Some argue that certain apocryphal gospels (the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Peter*), or sources underlying apocryphal gospels (the so-called "Cross Gospel"), predate the canonical gospels. See e.g. J. D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 132-33, 90-121. These arguments are, however, not widely accepted. See, for example, the critique in H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), pp. 218-20.

[27] See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 52-53.

Hengel has argued, some form of "title" for the gospels would have been necessary as soon as two or more separate gospel manuscripts were collected together, in order to distinguish them from each other.[28] Since we have good evidence of collections of at least two gospels from the latter part of the first century (see section A.3.c below), it is quite likely that these works were being identified by the title "Gospel according to . . ." (εὐαγγέλιον κατά. . .) as early as that.[29]

Certainly, from beginning of the second century, the term εὐαγγέλιον appears in early Christian writings with a new double valency.[30] On the one hand, εὐαγγέλιον can still be used to refer to the oral gospel message.[31] On the other hand, however, the term is also used—with steadily increasing frequency—to refer to written gospel texts. At least two authors from the first half of the second century employ the term in this way.[32]

1. The *Didache* (c. AD 100) refers at several points to "the gospel" or "the Lord's Gospel" in close association with material from a source similar to, if not identical with, our Matthew. In particular, at 8.2 the Didachist introduces a version of the Lord's Prayer very similar to that found in Matt. 6:9-13 with the words: "pray like this, just as the Lord commanded in his Gospel." The verbal similarities leave little room for doubt that the author had the Gospel of Matthew in mind.[33]

2. Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 110), in his letter to the Smyrneans (5.1), juxtaposes τὸ εὐαγγέλιον with "the prophecies" and "the law of Moses." The parallel thus drawn between "the gospel" and other written Scriptures strongly suggests that Ignatius intends a reference to the gospel in written form. Indeed, this reading is confirmed by the observation that in the

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[28] M. Hengel, "The Titles of the Gospels and the Gospel of Mark," in M. Hengel, ed., *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1985), pp. 64-84; M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), pp. 48-56.

[29] It is true that the earliest extant examples of the use of titles in this way date from the beginning of the third century: 𝔓[66] (c. AD 200) bears the clear *inscriptio* εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Ἰωάννην; and 𝔓[75] (c. AD 220) has a *subscriptio* to Luke and an *inscriptio* to John on the same page. Hengel's arguments, which rely on a detailed study of the practice of book distribution in the ancient world, nevertheless stand, since only a few manuscripts predate these examples, and the opening and closing leaves of papyri codices are, at any rate, often missing.

[30] For more detailed discussion of the alternative views on this question, see R. H. Gundry, "ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ: How Soon a Book?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), pp. 321-25; and J. A. Kelhoffer, "'How Soon a Book' Revisited: ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ as a Reference to 'Gospel' Materials in the First Half of the Second Century," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (2004), pp. 1-34.

[31] *1 Clement*, for example, probably written from Rome in the mid-90s AD, refers (at 47:2) to the earliest days of Christianity—in terms reminiscent of Mark 1:1 or Phil. 4:15—as "the beginning of the gospel." And, similarly, a generation later, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (probably c. AD 130) speaks of the "apostles who were destined to preach the gospel" (5:9, cf. 8:3).

[32] On the possible, but less convincing case of *2 Clem.* 8:5, see section B.1 below.

[33] See *Did*. 11:3; 15:3-4. For detailed discussion, see C. M. Tuckett, "Synoptic Tradition in the Didache," in J.-M. Sevrin, ed., *The New Testament in Early Christianity: La réception des écrits néotestamentaires dans le Christianisme primitif* (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), pp. 197-230.

creed-like opening of the letter (at 1.1) Ignatius says that Jesus was baptized by John "so that all righteousness might be fulfilled in him" (ἵνα πληρωθῇ πᾶσα δικαιοσύνη ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ). Again, the verbal similarity with Matt. 3:15, a verse unique to the First Gospel, makes it highly likely that Ignatius is quoting from that work.[34]

From the second half of the second century onwards, use of the term εὐαγγέλιον with this newly expanded semantic range became more common. Justin Martyr, for example, addressing the Emperor in his *First Apology* (c. 155–161), appeals to the authority of the "memoirs of the apostles. . . called gospels" and thus clearly has written works on view.[35] Likewise, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, writing towards the end of second century, employs the term εὐαγγέλιον no less than seventy-five times in the third book of his influential *Adversus haereses* (c. 180–192), and uses it there to refer both to the original apostolic proclamation and to written accounts of Jesus' life.[36] Irenaeus is, indeed, the first to make the distinction between the oral gospel and written gospels explicit, when he writes that the apostles at first "proclaimed the gospel in public" and "later, by the will of God, handed it down to us in the scriptures."[37]

Clearly, then, the use of εὐαγγέλιον in the Christian literature of the second century, bears witness to the increasing significance of written gospel accounts in that period. This, of course, is not to say that oral gospel sources were immediately abandoned as soon as the written gospels began to circulate, and it is most likely that oral traditions concerning Jesus persisted well into the second century. Nevertheless, as Bauckham has now shown, the early Christians valued, above all, access to those who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus. From the death of the primary witnesses of the first generation onwards, therefore, it was increasingly recognized that first-hand testimony about Jesus was best preserved in the written accounts they had left behind.[38]

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[34] Following Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 54-55. cf. also Ignatius, *Smyrn*. 7.2, and the less certain examples at *Phld*. 5.1-2; 8.2; 9.2. Note, however, W. R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), *loc. cit.*; and C. T. Brown, *The Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 1-6, 15-23, both of whom conclude that oral proclamation is on view.

[35] Justin, *1 Apol.* 66.3.3. It seems, however, that Justin preferred the designation "Memoirs of the Apostles" (ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων) for these works: he refers to them as such fifteen times, but only labels them "gospels" thrice. "Memoirs of the Apostles": *1 Apol.* 66.3; 67.3; *Dial*. 100.4; 101.3; 102.5; 103.6; 104.1; 105.6; 106.1.4. "Gospel": *1 Apol.* 66.3; *Dial*. 10.2 (where Trypho the Jew confesses that he has read "the gospel"); and *Dial*. 100.1, (where Justin introduces a quotation from Matt. 11:27 with the formula "in the gospel it is written" = γέγραπται).

[36] For further discussion, see Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, pp. 10-11.

[37] Irenaeus, *Haer*. 3.1.1. Interestingly, at *Haer*. 2.27.2 Irenaeus divides the whole of Scripture into the "Prophets" (presumably the Old Testament) and the "Gospels" (presumably the NT): *universae Scripturae et Prophetiae et Evangelica*. It seems, then, that at least for Irenaeus "Gospels" could refer not only to narrative accounts of Jesus' life, but to other literary works, such as the epistles, which contained the gospel message.

[38] Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 21-38. The example of Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis, is instructive. As Bauckham demonstrates, Papias' stated preference for "a living and

The original and continuing oral proclamation of the gospel was, therefore, remarkably quickly augmented by a range of written gospel accounts, and these written accounts took on increased significance as authoritative witnesses when there were no longer any people left who could authoritatively speak of their first-hand experience of Jesus.

(b) From Singular to Plural

The second transformation in the early Christian understanding of "the gospel" may be dealt with quite briefly. The striking point here is that, even though written gospel sources multiplied from the second half of the first century onwards, and even though the plural term εὐαγγέλια ("glad tidings" or "gospels") appears with relative frequency in the pagan context of early Christianity, Christian writings right up to the end of the second century— almost without exception—employ εὐαγγέλιον in the singular. As noted previously, the plural εὐαγγέλια is entirely absent from the NT. And indeed, prior to Irenaeus, εὐαγγέλια appears only twice in the extant literature: first, and with some reticence, in Justin's *First Apology* 66.3; and then, in a fragment of Apollinaris, the Bishop of Hierapolis, who wrote at the time of Marcus Aurelius (c. 170s AD).[39] Even Irenaeus markedly prefers the singular to the plural, and of the seventy-five occurrence of εὐαγγέλιον in Book 3 of his *Adversus haereses* only five are plural. Clement of Alexandria, likewise, tends to retain the singular εὐαγγέλιον for the Christian message, using the plural only rarely.[40] Therefore, even though a plurality of written gospel sources were in circulation from the apostolic era onwards, it was not until the third century that Christian writers began to refer to "the gospels," plural, with any frequency. Even Augustine, writing early in the fifth century, was keen to clarify, when he referred to the "four gospels," that it was better to say "in the four books of the one gospel."[41]

The best explanation for this phenomenon was first mooted by Oscar Cullman, who argued persuasively that Christian writers preferred to use the singular εὐαγγέλιον because they understood the idea of a plural "gospel" as a "theological impossibility": God had announced only one gospel, that of his Son, and none other was either necessary or conceivable.[42] Thus, although a plurality of written gospel texts were recognized and accepted as authoritative from quite an early date (see A.3.c-d below), early Christian writers

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surviving voice" over "information from books" (*apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4) stemmed not from a general preference for orality over textuality, but for a desire for access to first-hand information which, in the period to which he refers (c. 80s AD), was still available from living eye-witnesses.

[39] The fragment of Apollinaris' Περὶ τοῦ Πάσχα (On the Passover) is preserved in the Preface to the *Chronicon Paschale*. See M. J. Routh, *Reliquiae Sacrae*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1846), p. 160.

[40] Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, p. 10.

[41] *Tract. ep. Jo.* 36:1.

[42] O. Cullmann, "Die Pluralität der Evangelien als theologisches Problem im Altertum," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1945), pp. 23-42; cf. Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, p. 4.

throughout the first few centuries preferred to emphasize that there was only one gospel of Jesus Christ, even if it was promulgated in a variety of written texts.[43]

3. *The Four: Apocryphal Gospels, Gospel Harmonies & the Emergence of the Fourfold Gospel Canon*

The emergence of a plurality of written gospel sources during the second part of the first century gave way during the second century to two competing tendencies: the tendency towards multiplication, and the tendency towards harmonization. It was in the context of these competing tendencies that the four NT gospels, individually recognized as uniquely authoritative from the very earliest period, emerged as the fourfold gospel canon.

(a) *The Tendency Towards Multiplication: Apocryphal Gospels*

On the one hand, there was a strong tendency to extend and augment the existing plurality of gospel sources with a range of alternative gospel authorities. In addition to the strong oral traditions about Jesus that persisted alongside the earliest written gospels, the second century saw the emergence of a new range of written gospels—the so-called "apocryphal gospels"— which soon began to gain some currency.[44]

The apocryphal gospels differ from each other as much in their origins and style as they do in theology and substance (*Table 1*). The *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, probably written around the first half of the second century, is a collection of one hundred and fourteen *logia* or sayings of Jesus with distinctly Gnostic flavor, and lacks the extended narrative so characteristic of the canonical gospels. In contrast, the "Jewish-Christian gospels" of the *Nazarenes* and *Ebionites*, written around the same time, were similar in genre to the canonical gospels, sharing with them a similar structure and a number of narratives.[45]

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[43] This same theological conviction probably also explains the form of the titles attached to the gospels from early in the second century: "Gospel according to…" (εὐαγγέλιον κατά . . .). So Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, pp. 48-56.

[44] For introduction and commentary on the apocryphal gospels, see W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 1: Gospels and Related Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). See also chapter nine of this volume.

[45] For detailed discussion, see S. Gero, "Apocryphal Gospels: A Survey of Literary and Textual Problems," *ANRW* 2.25.5 (1988), pp. 3969-96; A. F. J. Klijn, "Das Hebräer- und das Nazoräerevangelium," *ANRW* 2.25.5 (1988), pp. 3997-4033; G. Howard, "The Gospel of the Ebionites," *ANRW* 2.25.5 (1988), pp. 4034-53.

Name	Original Language	Date	Provenance
Thomas	Greek (extant Coptic)	c. 100–150?	Syria
Peter	Greek	c. 150	Syria?
Hebrews	Greek	c. 100–150	Egypt
Nazarenes	Aramaic/Syriac	c. 100–150	Syria
Ebionites	Greek	c. 100–150	Trans-Jordan?
Egyptians	Greek	c. 100–150?	Egypt
Secret Mark	Greek	?	Egypt
Protoevang. of James	Greek	c. 150–200	Syria
Judas	Greek (extant Coptic)	Late second century?	Egypt
Infan. G. Thom.	Greek	Late second century	?
Phillip	Greek (extant Coptic)	c. 200–250?	Syria?

Table 1. Apocryphal Gospels.[46]

The relationship of these works to the canonical gospels also varies enormously. Some, like the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, and the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, are clearly dependent on the canonical gospels. Others, like the *Gospel of the Hebrews* show no sign of such dependence. And yet others, like the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, stand in an unclear relationship to the earlier gospels. For our purposes, a range of written gospels became available from the second century onwards, and these appear in various ways in the other early Christian literature (see further section B and chapter 9 of this volume).[47]

(b) The Tendency towards Harmonization: Marcion and Tatian

On the other hand, in some quarters there was an equally strong tendency to harmonize the plurality of gospels sources in an effort to produce one single authoritative written gospel. This tendency took various forms, and could be motivated by significantly different factors, as the two most important examples from the second century demonstrate.

In 144, Marcion of Sinope in Pontus was expelled from the church of Rome for heretical opinions, which included, among other things, the

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[46] Based on Schneemelcher, *NT Apocrypha 1*. For the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, see M. Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); but note the critique of S. C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005). For the *Gospel of Judas* see, most recently, S. Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas: Rewriting Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[47] For a recent introductory survey of the apocryphal gospels, see C. Tuckett, "Forty Other Gospels," in M. Bockmuehl, D. A. Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel*, pp. 238-53.

rejection of all gospels except Luke (which was itself excised of those sections Marcion considered too "Jewish").[48] Marcion's radical redaction of the gospel traditions later drew from Tertullian, with characteristically colorful invective, the accusation that Marcion was "the Pontic Mouse. . . who gnawed the Gospels to pieces."[49] Although our only access to Marcion is through the words of his detractors, it seems he distinguished the merciful supreme God (the Father of Jesus) from the vengeful creator of the Hebrew Scriptures, and offered a semi-gnostic theology mixed with a strict asceticism. Marcion rejected all the gospels but Luke (and much else besides) because they contradicted his radical vision of God. His attempt to limit the number of written gospels was thus driven by a profoundly theological motivation.[50]

In contrast, Tatian, who composed his *Diatessaron* in Rome (or perhaps Syria) sometime before 170, was the thoroughly "orthodox" student of Justin Martyr. His work was an attempt to harmonize the four NT gospels while retaining the entire text of all four.[51] To achieve this, it seems that Tatian set three of the gospels in the framework of the fourth (either Matthew or John).[52] His aim seems to have been to create one authoritative gospel to replace the others, and thus simultaneously provide a sure foundation for the church and a united answer to its critics.[53] His motivation was more pragmatic than theological, as he aimed to serve the pastoral and apologetic needs of the church.

What the examples of Marcion and Tatian show is that, in addition to the proliferation of written gospels which characterized the second century, there were also attempts made in some quarters to excise or harmonize the written gospel traditions to create a single authoritative text. It was in the context of these competing tendencies that the fourfold gospel canon emerged.

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[48] Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.27.2; 3.11.7-9; 3.12.12; 3.14.3.

[49] Tertullian, *Marc.* 1.1; cf. 1.19.

[50] The classic work on Marcion is still A. Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Ein Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924). Of the more recent works, see esp. P. M. Head, "The Foreign God and the Sudden Christ: Theology and Christology in Marcion's Gospel Redaction," *Tyndale Bulletin* (1993), pp. 307-21; G. May, K. Greschat and M. Meiser, *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung—Marcion and His Impact on Church History* (New York: de Gruyter, 2002).

[51] The same tendency towards harmonization is evident in the *Gospel of the Ebionites* which harmonizes the three Synoptic Gospels around a Matthean framework. See Schneemelcher, *NT Apocrypha 1*, pp. 166-71.

[52] Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.29.6. Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, p. 137 believes that the *Diatessaron* was structured around John. Note, however, W. L. Petersen, "Tatian's Diatessaron," in H. Koester, ed., *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), pp. 403-30, who believes that Matthew was used to structure the work (p. 430). For further discussion, see esp. W. L. Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance and History of Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

[53] T. Baarda, "ΔΙΑΦΩΝΙΑ-ΣΥΜΦΩΝΙΑ: Factors in the Harmonisation of the Gospels, Especially in the Diatessaron of Tatian," in W. L. Petersen, ed., *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text and Transmission* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 133-54.

(c) The Fourfold Gospel Collection

It is difficult to identify a single point at which individual gospel manuscripts were first collected together; the absolute origins of the fourfold gospel collection we know from the NT are likewise elusive. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some key points in the process by which the four gospels were collected together—and recognized as an authoritative unit—during the course of the second century.

The earliest reference to a collection of written gospel sources comes from Luke (c. AD 60–85), who testifies (as noted previously) that even as early as his time "many (had) undertaken to set down an orderly account" of the events of Jesus life (Luke 1:1-4). Most probably, Luke had at least some of these accounts in front of him as he wrote. Indeed, on the basis of the verbal similarities between large sections of the three Synoptic Gospels, it is widely accepted that not only Luke but also Matthew had access at least to the Gospel of Mark, and probably also to other (no longer extant) written gospel sources ("Q," "proto-Luke," "proto-Matthew"). It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that already by the last quarter of the first century, collections of individual gospel manuscripts had begun to be assembled at major Christian centers such as Caesarea (Luke?) and Antioch (Matthew?).[54]

It is therefore not unlikely that John, writing from Ephesus towards the end of the century,[55] had access to a collection of gospel manuscripts which included Matthew, Mark and Luke. This, at least, is the testimony of a widespread early tradition, which avers that the Fourth Evangelist knew the three Synoptics and consciously wrote his gospel as a supplement to them.[56] It may be, then, that the four gospels were first collected together in Ephesus at the end of the first century.

This does not mean, of course, that such a collection was universally available at that time. Nevertheless, evidence from the first half of the second century demonstrates that collections of individual gospel manuscripts, and particularly of the four NT gospels, continued to be made, and took on

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[54] For the argument that Luke accessed a collection of written gospel sources at Caesarea, see E. E. Ellis, "New Directions in the History of Early Christianity," in T. W. Hilllard, R. A. Kearsley, C. E. V. Nixon, A. M. Nobbs, eds., *Ancient History in a Modern University, Vol. 2: Early Christianity, Late Antiquity and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 71-92. In relation to Matthew, the majority view is that the First Gospel was composed in Antioch, but the precise location is immaterial to our argument here: wherever Matthew was located when he wrote, he seems to have had access to earlier written gospel sources.

[55] For a concise and balanced discussion of the provenance of John, favoring Ephesus c. AD 80-85, see Carson and Moo, *New Testament*, pp. 229-67.

[56] Eusebius records the earlier testimony of Clement of Alexandria (*Hist. eccl*. 6.14.7), and lends his own weight to the tradition at 3.24.1-13. Cf. the less direct accounts of Irenaeus (*Haer*. 3.1.1; cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 5.8.2-4) and Papias (*apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 3.39.1-16); and the later evidence of the fourth century *Acta S. Timothei* (Greek text in R. A. Lipsius, *Die Apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und Apostellegenden*, vol. 2 (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke und Sohn: 1884), pp. 372-400). For a full account of the parallel evidence for the tradition, see T. Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, vol. 2 (Erlangen/Leipzig: Deichert, 1890–92), p. 37, n. 1.

increasing significance. At the beginning of the century Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia, "the hearer of John" and "companion of Polycarp,"[57] knew at least Matthew and Mark, and possibly also John.[58] More significantly, both the Longer Ending of Mark (Mark 16:9-20) and the *Epistula Apostolorum* (both best dated pre-150)[59] make use of all four gospels later accepted in the canon.[60] These texts testify, therefore, that a fourfold collection was becoming established in the churches by the middle of the second century.[61] Moreover, to this literary evidence must be added that of the gospel manuscripts themselves. Although it is true that the earliest four gospel codices date from the end of the second century,[62] the nature of these manuscripts makes it quite likely that they reflect earlier editions dating back at least to the middle of the century.[63]

Taken cumulatively, then, this evidence suggests that the fourfold gospel collection had been adopted—at least in some of the churches—by around the year 150. As such, although it is often asserted that the development of the fourfold gospel was a reaction of the early church to Marcion, it is more likely that Marcion's radical excision of the gospels only served to consolidate a process that was already well underway.[64]

Certainly, from the second half of the second century onwards, a growing chorus of voices begins to attest to the unique status of the four most ancient gospels. First, Justin Martyr, who wrote from Rome in the 150s AD, is

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[57] Irenaeus *apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.1. For detailed discussion and arguments in favor of an early date (c. AD 110), see U. H. J. Körtner, *Papias von Hierapolis: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des frühen Christentums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 89-94, 167-72, 225-26.

[58] For Papias on Matthew and Mark, see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15-16. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, p. 79 suggests that Papias' listing of the disciples in the order Andrew, Peter, Philip and Thomas—an order found in Fourth Gospel and no where else—is a telltale sign of Papias' knowledge of John.

[59] For the Longer Ending of Mark see Kelhoffer, "How Soon a Book?" p. 10. For the *Epistula Apostolorum* see C. E. Hill, "The *Epistula Apostolorum*: An Asian Tract from the Time of Polycarp," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999), pp. 1-53.

[60] Hengel, "The Titles of the Gospels and the Gospel of Mark," p. 72 concludes that Mark 16.9-20 and the *Epistula Apostolorum* are "probably the earliest Christian texts to presuppose all the gospels and Acts." For detailed analysis of the use of the four gospels in the longer ending of Mark, see J. A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 48-156.

[61] Cf. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 63-91.

[62] Three separate papyri (i. $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$; ii. $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$; and iii. $\mathfrak{P}^{4}$, $\mathfrak{P}^{64}$, $\mathfrak{P}^{67}$ understood as a single codex) vie for the honor of the earliest extant four gospel codex. For the debate, see T. C. Skeat, "The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels?" *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997), pp. 1-34; G. N. Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997), pp. 317-46; and P. M. Head, "Is P4, P64 and P67 the Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels? A Response to T. C. Skeat," *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005), pp. 450-57.

[63] Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 71-75.

[64] For similar conclusions, see B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), pp. 90-99; cf. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, p. 81. For a recent discussion of the influence of Marcion on the development of the fourfold gospel canon, see U. Schmid, "Marcions Evangelium und die neutestamentlichen Evangelien: Rückfragen zur Geschichte und Kanonisierung der Evangelienüberlieferung," in May, Greschat and Meiser, eds., *Marcion*, pp. 67-77.

particularly important as the first Christian writer for whom we have a significant corpus. There is no doubt that Justin knew the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, since he cites them regularly. He most probably also knew Mark, since at one point he refers to the name Boanerges—which Jesus gave to the sons of Zebedee—and cites the "Memoirs of Peter" (= Mark) as his source.[65] Justin's knowledge of the Fourth Gospel cannot be so easily demonstrated, but it is quite possible that *1 Apol.* 61.4 reflects John 3:3-5 and *Dial.* 88.7 relies on John 1:19-20.[66] Be that as it may, it is significant that Justin does not cite any non-canonical gospel source, despite the fact that at least some of the apocryphal gospels had been written by his time (see A.3.a above).[67] Justin therefore provides good evidence that, at least in Rome around the middle of the second century, a gospel collection consisting of at least Matthew, Mark and Luke, and quite possibly also John—but not any other gospel—was in use.[68]

Second, the likelihood that Justin knew a collection of all four gospels is strengthened by the fact that his student, Tatian, certainly did. For Tatian's *Diatessaron*, composed c. 170, presupposes both that its author had access to the four canonical gospels, and that he considered them authoritative in some way, even if his work sought to surpass the four gospels by resolving their differences.

Third, towards the end of the century Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, became the first early Christian author to explicitly outline the fourfold gospel (c. 180s AD). In book three of his *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus argues that "it is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are" since "he who was manifested to men has given us the gospel under four aspects but bound together by one Spirit."[69] This argument was novel. As we have seen, however, Irenaeus' basic assertion of an irreducible fourfold gospel was no innovation. Indeed, the Bishop's arguments at *Haer.* 3.11.9 are clearly framed with at least two sets of opponents in mind, and thus reveal that he was motivated by recent attacks on the (heretofore widely accepted) concept

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[65] *Dial.* 106.3. The designation Boanerges is unique amongst the four gospels to Mark 3:17, and it is therefore most likely that Mark was Justin's source. See C.-J. Thornton, "Justin und das Markusevangelium," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1993), pp. 93-100.

[66] Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 76, 101-2.

[67] The most comprehensive discussion of Justin's use of the gospels is still Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, vol. 1 (Erlangen/Leipzig: Deichert, 1888-89), pp. 463-560. For a considered rejection of the suggestion that Justin used apocryphal gospels see A. J. Bellinzoni, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Writings of Justin Martyr* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), p. 139; cf. T. K. Heckel, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), pp. 310-29.

[68] Justin's statement in *Dial.* 103.8 may also be significant in this connection. He states there that the gospels "were composed by the apostles and their successors." Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, p. 76 plausibly suggests that the double plural here ("apostles" and "successors") indicates that Justin knew at least four gospels: perhaps, under the title "apostles" Justin thought of Matthew and John, while the designation "successors" was his way of referring to Mark and Luke.

[69] For discussion, see E. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 175-77.

of the fourfold gospel.[70] On the one hand, Irenaeus' insistence that the one spirit had inspired a diversity in the apostolic witness to Christ is a defence against the likes of Marcion and Tatian who, in very different ways, had attempted to limit the written gospel to a single volume. On the other hand, his limitation of this diversity to *four* recognized gospels is designed to undercut gnostic claims that the risen Christ had revealed himself secretly to a plethora of authorized witnesses. The Bishop of Lyons was, then, the first to articulate the concept of the fourfold gospel, but his arguments imply that the concept had previously been, in many quarters, simply assumed.

Finally, then, the Muratorian Fragment,[71] which is probably best dated to the end of the second century,[72] is the first Christian text to contain a kind of "canon list." Although the initial part of the fragment is missing, it commences with what must be a description of Mark, and goes on to list Luke and John as the "Third" and "Fourth" Gospels respectively. The Muratorian Fragment, therefore comports well with the evidence from the papyri, and from Justin, Tatian and Irenaeus, and confirms that by the end of the second century the fourfold gospel had become widely established amongst the churches from Rome to Alexandria.[73]

This consensus was, of course, not unchallenged. Gaius, an otherwise "orthodox" Roman presbyter, rejected the Gospel of John because of its perceived affinity with Montanism.[74] Clement of Alexandria, likewise, while accepting the superior authority of "the four gospels that have been handed down to us,"[75] still regularly quotes from apocryphal gospels and seems to have to recognized some sort of authority in them also.[76] And Serapion, the Bishop of Antioch, happily permitted the church in Rhossos in Syria to read

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[70] See further H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 155-209; Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," here: pp. 319-22; Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, pp. 10-12.

[71] An English translation of the Fragment may be conveniently accessed in H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 28-29.

[72] A. C. Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: a Fourth Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973), pp. 1-41 questioned the traditional date, assigning the list the fourth century. Cf. now G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Frgament and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), esp. 215-18. The traditional dating has, however, been convincingly defended by E. Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982), pp. 677-83; C. E. Hill, "The Debate Over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995), pp. 437-52; cf. Heckel, *Evangelium*, pp. 340-42. For our purposes it is important to note that even if the Muratorian Fragment does belong to the fourth century, this hardly undermines the argument outlined above.

[73] Cf. the similar conclusion reached by R. A. Piper, "The One, the Four and the Many," in M. Bockmuehl and D. A. Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 254-73.

[74] Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25.6-7; 3.28; 6.20.3; cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.1; 3.11.9.

[75] Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.92; 3.93.1: "We do not have this saying [the saying in dispute] in the four gospels that have been handed down to us, but in that according to the Egyptians." Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Hypotyposes* Book 6, *apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.5-7.

[76] *Gospel of the Egyptians*: Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.45.4; 3.63.1; *Gospel of the Hebrews*: Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.45.4 f.; cf. 5.96.2-4; an otherwise unknown gospel: Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5.63.7.

the *Gospel of Peter* in worship, before later retracting this permission in objection to the docetic tendencies of the work.[77] These examples attest to a continuing fluidity around the edges of the fourfold gospel collection at the turn of the third century. Nevertheless, such challenges seem to have presupposed the authority of an existing collection, and this in itself provides further evidence for the unique position that the "quadriform gospel" had achieved by the end of the second century.

(d) The Four Gospels as Canonical Scripture

A brief note must be added here on the vexed question of canonicity, which is essentially a question about the authority and status of the gospels (or other works) within the early church.[78] At this point, definitions are crucial, for as Metzger notes, much confusion has resulted from the failure to distinguish the "fundamental idea of canonicity from the actual drawing up of a list of canonical books."[79] This "fundamental idea of canonicity" is the recognition that a limited number of works bear a unique authority as Scripture. Thus, although we have no record of NT canon lists being drawn up until the end of the second century,[80] and the canon was not officially closed until the end of the fourth century,[81] this does not preclude the possibility that many of the books of the NT (including the four gospels) were nevertheless recognized as uniquely authoritative Scripture, and therefore in principle as "canonical," at a much earlier date.[82]

Indeed, there is little doubt that the four NT gospels were, individually, recognized as uniquely authoritative already in the first century. As E. E. Ellis has demonstrated, each of the four gospels was most probably associated with a distinct apostolic mission, and was thus recognized from the beginning as bearing the authority of the apostle with whom it was associated (James/Matthew, Peter/Mark, Paul/Luke, John/John).[83] Since apostolic

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[77] Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12; cf. 5.19.

[78] On the question of the gospels in the NT canon see now: L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), esp. pp. 295-320, 372-86, 416-39; and L. M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission and Authority* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), pp. 250-64.

[79] Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 98-99.

[80] The earliest is probably the Muratorian Fragment from the end of the second century, on which see section A.3.c above.

[81] Athanasius of Alexandria's *Festal Letter 39* for AD 367 is first ancient list to match our twenty-seven book NT canon exactly, and the same list was first ratified—on Augustine's recommendation—by the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397).

[82] See further the helpful discussion in E. Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1—From Christ to Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 114-19.

[83] The argument turns on three distinct sets of evidence: i. a number of key NT texts suggest distinct but co-ordinated apostolic missions (Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:3-8; Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14; 12:17; 15:7, 12-21; 21:17-26); ii. analysis of the NT literature reveals several important parallels between the four gospels and epistles associated with the four key apostles (James/Matthew, Paul/Luke-Acts, Peter/Mark, John's letters /John); and iii. the unusual, and therefore probably significant, reference in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* 1.1.11, to the

authority was associated from the beginning with the authority of Jesus himself, and Jesus' authority in turn with divine authority, the groundwork for the recognition of the apostolic testimony to Jesus as Scripture was laid at a very early date.[84]

It is therefore no surprise to find that, already in the first half of the second century, *Barnabas* 4.14 could introduce Matt. 22:14 with the formula "as it is written" (ὡς γέγραπται)—a formula that was customarily used to introduce scriptural quotations. Similarly, *2 Clement* 2.4 could straightforwardly refer to Matt. 9:13/Mark 2:17 as "another scripture" (ἑτέρα γραφή). In the second half of the century, likewise, Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (100.2) could introduce a quotation from Matt. 11:27/Luke 10:22 with the formula "in the gospel it is written" (= γέγραπται). And towards the end of the century Irenaeus could refer to the gospels as Scripture, arguing at one point that "the entire Scriptures, the Prophets, and the Gospels [*cum itaque universae scripturae, et prophetiae et Euangelii. . .*] can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all."[85] Clearly, then, although second century Christian authors primarily employed the designation "Scripture" to refer to the texts of the Old Testament (OT), there is ample evidence that the gospels began to enjoy a similar status as Scripture from at least as early as the first half of that century.[86]

Furthermore, it seems most probable that an important part of the original purpose of constructing written gospel sources was for them to be read in the early Christian assemblies, whether the messianic "synagogues" of Judea, Galilee and Samaria, or the Christian assemblies of Asia Minor, Greece and Rome.[87] Since the practice of Jewish synagogues in the first and second centuries was that only canonical Scriptures may be read in the assembly, it is

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"tradition . . . from Peter, James, John and Paul." See E. E. Ellis, "Gospels Criticism: A Perspective on the State of the Art," in P. Stuhlmacher, ed., *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 45-54; Ellis, "New Directions"; cf. P. W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 376-94. It is important to note that this argument does not necessarily imply that all four gospels had reached their final form by the end of the apostolic era, only that the key written gospel sources (Mark, "Q," "proto-Matthew," "proto-Luke"), which later formed the core of the canonical gospels in their final form, were composed by, or under the supervision of, the apostles.

[84] E.g. Matt. 10:1-5/Mark 3:14-16/Luke 6:13; 9:1-2; Matt. 10:40-42/Mark 9:41/Luke 10:16; Matt. 28:18-20; John 17:18; 20:21-23; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 3:15-16.

[85] *Haer*. 2.27.2; cf. also *Haer*. 4.41.1 which introduces a tradition similar to Matt. 13:18 with "Scripture says," and *Haer*. 2.22.3; 4.20.6 both of which introduce a citation from the gospels with the formular "it is written." On the status of Jesus traditions and the gospels in Justin and Irenaeus, see now especially Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 92-109 (= G. Stanton, "Jesus Traditions and Gospels in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus," in J.-M. Auwers and H. J. De Jonge, eds., *The Biblical Canons* [Leuven: Peeters, 2003], pp. 353-70).

[86] It is true that certain non-canonical Jesus traditions are occasionally identified as "Scripture" in the early Christian literature (e.g. *1 Clem*. 23.3). These are, however, the exception rather than the rule.

[87] See esp. Mark 13:14/Matt. 24:15 where the instruction to the reader ("let the reader understand") is most probably intended for the one who was to read the gospel in the public assembly.

likely that the fourfold gospel, or the sources that underlie them, were accorded something akin to the status of Scripture from the start.[88] Certainly, by the middle of the second century in Rome, Justin could attest to the Christian practice of reading "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets" for "as long as time permits" in the regular Sunday gatherings of the Christian communities (*1 Apol*. 67.3). There are no hints in Justin's account that the practice was a recent innovation; it may well have been characteristic practice amongst the churches for many decades. Significantly, the fact that the "Memoirs of the Apostles" (= gospels) were being read in worship, in concert with the prophetic literature, speaks volumes for the status accorded to the gospels, at least in the Christian communities known to Justin.

It is clear, then, that the "fundamental idea of canonicity" was attached to the four gospels from at least the first half of the second century, if not even earlier.[89] To be sure, the challenges posed by Marcion and others (Gnosticism, Montanism) during the second century provided an important impetus to the closing of the canon.[90] As noted previously, it was in part these challenges which drew from Irenaeus the explicit defence of the *four* gospels. Nevertheless, the process of recognizing the gospels as Scripture, and therefore in principle as canonical, had begun much earlier.

4. Conclusion

The transmission of gospel traditions in the early church took place through a range of overlapping processes. The earliest oral proclamation of the gospel was augmented, remarkably quickly, first by a range of written gospel sources, then by what became the four canonical gospels, and finally, from the second century onwards, by a thicket of other gospels which began to grow up alongside the earlier traditions. The result of this complex set of processes was that, at least from latter part of the first century to the beginning of the third, gospel traditions were available from a range of sources and in a variety of forms. In what follows we shall address the remaining question: how did the earliest Christian authors outside the NT put these gospel traditions to use?

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[88] E. E. Ellis, "The Making of Narratives in the Synoptic Gospels," in H. Wansbrough, ed., *Jesus and the Oral Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 310-33: here p. 331; Ellis, "New Directions." pp. 89-92. cf. John 2:22 where the words of Jesus are already set in parallel with the Hebrew Scriptures.

[89] For a very different view, see H. Koester, "The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century," in W. E. Petersen, ed., *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 19-37, who argues that it was only after the year 200 that the gospels were "considered holy scripture" and "no such respect was accorded them in the earliest period" (p. 19).

[90] Cf. E. Ferguson, "Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon: A Survey of Some Recent Studies," in L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate*, pp. 295-320.

B. The Use of Gospel Materials in Early Christianity: Case Studies in the Apostolic Fathers

The task of analyzing the use of gospel materials in the collection of works known as the Apostolic Fathers is a vexed one.[91] The collection itself is a modern construction with somewhat blurred boundaries dating to the seventeenth century. It contains a diverse body of works. They range in provenance from Rome (e.g., *1 Clement*) and Athens (Quadratus) to Antioch (e.g. the *Didache*?) and Alexandria (*Barnabas*). They encompass a variety of genres including letters (*1 Clement*, Polycarp, Ignatius) and an apocalypse (of sorts: the *Shepherd*), a church manual (the *Didache*) and a martyrology (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*). And they date from anywhere between the mid 90s AD (*1 Clement*) to perhaps the 170s (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*).[92] The unity of such a diverse collection is found in the fact that these texts together represent the earliest proto-orthodox non-canonical writings outside the NT.

The Apostolic Fathers are thus located at a pivotal point in the development of the gospel traditions. To begin with, oral traditions about Jesus were still alive and well amongst the churches as the Apostolic Fathers began to write. Moreover, the first stages in the composition of their works overlapped with the final stages in the composition of the four canonical gospels. Not long afterwards, the first apocryphal gospels began to appear. And at the same time the fourfold gospel collection had begun to take shape, even if it was definitely still in its infancy.

In what follows we shall first address the problem of identifying the sources of gospel materials in the Apostolic Fathers, before outlining some patterns and tendencies in the way these authors used the gospel traditions.

1. The Problem of Identifying the Sources of Gospel Materials in the Apostolic Fathers: 1 & 2 Clement

Older scholarship tended to assume that citations (whether direct quotations or allusions) of gospel materials in the Apostolic Fathers must have been drawn from the four canonical gospels. From the late 1950s onwards, however, a steady stream of scholars successfully questioned this traditional assumption by showing that, in many cases, gospel materials which appear in the

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[91] The Apostolic Fathers may be conveniently accessed in the recent translations of: B. D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vols. 1 & 2 (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003); and M. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). Most recent collections contain the following works: *1 Clement*, *2 Clement*, seven letters of Ignatius, Polycarp's letter to the Philpians, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, fragments of Papias (and Quadratus), the *Epistle to Diognetus*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

[92] The other contender for the honor of the earliest work in the collection is the *Didache*, which most would date to around AD 100, but almost certainly contains much earlier material. At the other end of the spectrum, it is quite possible that the *Epistle to Diognetus* postdates the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. That work was most probably written sometime during the second half of the second century, but the evidence is inconclusive. For discussion see the introduction to each work in Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, and the bibliographies there.

Apostolic Fathers are just as likely to have been drawn from oral tradition as from the canonical gospels.[93] The problem, of course, is that the four canonical gospels overlap significantly with each another, with other written gospels, and with the oral traditions about Jesus that persisted well into the second century. Moreover, the situation is further complicated by the tendency of some authors to quote rather freely from their sources. The result is that it is difficult to determine which gospels, if any, were known to any given early Christian author in the first part of the second century.

Nevertheless, some more recent studies have again begun to argue, in response to the excesses of the minimalist position, that at least some of the gospel citations in the Apostolic Fathers are drawn from the four NT gospels.[94] Demonstrating direct literary dependence is, however, often difficult, and it is increasingly recognized that the use of gospel *materials* in the Apostolic Fathers must be carefully distinguished from the use of the canonical gospels. Judgments about the source of gospel materials must be made on a case by case basis.[95]

The point may be illustrated by reference to the use of gospel materials in *1 Clement* and *2 Clement*. Despite the common name, and the association of these two texts in the manuscript tradition,[96] they are essentially unrelated. *1 Clement* is a letter written c. AD 95–96 by Clement of Rome (whether "bishop" or not is debated) to the church in Corinth.[97] It has the distinction of being the first extant, and securely dateable, early Christian writing outside the canon of the NT, and was widely known in antiquity. In contrast, *2 Clement* was not well known. It is an early Christian homily (probably the earliest extant homily outside the NT), written by a different hand somewhere around the middle of the second century.[98] In both texts the difficulty of identifying the sources of the gospel materials cited is manifest.

To begin with *1 Clement*, then, it is clear that the "bishop" of Rome was at least aware of the synoptic tradition which stood "behind or parallel with" the Synoptic Gospels.[99] At 13.2 (cf. Matt. 5:7; 6:14; 7:1-2; Luke 6:31, 36-38) and 46.8 (cf. Matt. 26:24; Luke 17:1-2) Clement quotes "the words of the

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[93] The seminal work was H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (Berlin: Akademie, 1957), anticipated in some ways by J. V. Bartlett, K. Lake, A. J. Carlyle, W. R. Inge, P. V. M. Benecke, J. Drummond, *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905). For a bibliography of works in this stream, see Kelhoffer, "How Soon a Book?," p. 2, n. 2.

[94] See here: Tuckett, "Synoptic Tradition in the Didache"; C. N. Jefford, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Brown, *Gospel*.

[95] Kelhoffer "How Soon a Book?," pp. 9-10. A full compendium of more recent research, with extensive bibliographies, may be found in C. Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: the Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 404-28.

[96] *2 Clement* appears after *1 Clement* in both the two Greek Codices (Alexandrinus, fifth century AD; Hierosolymitanus AD 1056) and the Syriac manuscript (dated AD 1169) which preserve the first letter. See Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 1:161-62.

[97] Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 18-31.

[98] On the date of *2 Clement* see Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 159-60.

[99] D. A. Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), p. 135.

Lord Jesus" in terms which clearly evoke traditions preserved in the Synoptic Gospels. Likewise, at 24.5 there is an unmistakable allusion to the parable of the Sower (cf. Mark 4:3 and par.). In none of these cases, however, does Clement preserve the words of the Synoptic Gospels verbatim, and the order in which he cites Jesus' maxims is also idiosyncratic. Given that Clement often seems to have quoted loosely from his sources, it is quite possible that he had before him one or more of the Synoptic Gospels.[100] For the reasons just cited it is, however, perhaps just as likely that his source was oral gospel tradition.[101]

Similarly, in regards to John, Clement again seems to reflect some knowledge of the gospel and its thought at various points in his letter.[102] Nevertheless, verbal identity is lacking in every instance, and in several cases the apparent similarity to the Fourth Gospel can be explained by reference to other passages in the Jewish and Christian literary corpus. It is therefore unlikely that Clement knew the Gospel of John.[103]

In contrast, it seems quite likely that the author of *2 Clement*, writing a full generation later, had access to written gospel traditions very similar to (if not identical with) the canonical gospels, and that he held them in very high esteem. For example, *2 Clem.* 2.4 reads: "And another scripture says, 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (καὶ ἑτέρα δὲ γραφη λέγει ὅτι Οὐκ ἦλθον καλέσαι δικαίου, ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλούς). The use of γραφή (writing, or Scripture) here, together with the fact that the quote is set in parallel with an earlier quote from Isa. 54.1 (*2 Clem.* 2.1-3), demands that a written source is on view. In addition, the Greek is verbally identical to Mark 2:17/Matt. 9:13 (cf. Luke 5:32), which makes it highly probable that *2 Clement* is here directly dependent on one of those two Gospels. If this conclusion is correct, then *2 Clem.* 2.4 is most probably the first instance of a NT passage being cited as "Scripture."[104]

It does not follow, of course, that any and every allusion or semi-quotation of a gospel tradition in *2 Clement* should be ascribed to the author's dependence on a canonical gospel. Nowhere near the same degree of certainty is possible, for example, with a reference like that of *2 Clem.* 9.5 which speaks of Christ who "became flesh." Although the statement seems to reflect John 1:14, it is so short that nothing approaching certainty is possible, and, indeed, it could just as easily have been drawn from the general stock of

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[100] So J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1.2 (London: Macmillan, 1889–90), p. 52.

[101] For detailed discussion see Hagner, *Clement of Rome*, pp. 135-78.

[102] *1 Clem.* 42.1 cf. John 17:18; 20:21; *1 Clem.* 43.6 & 59.3 cf. John 17:3; *1 Clem.* 48.4 cf. John 10:9; *1 Clem.* 49.1 cf. John 14:15; 15:10; *1 Clem.* 49.6 cf. John 6:51; *1 Clem.* 54.2 cf. John 10:2-16, 26-28; 21:16-17; *1 Clem.* 60.2 cf. John 17:17.

[103] Hagner, *Clement of Rome*, pp. 264-68. This conclusion is made all the more probable by the observation that many would date the Fourth Gospel as late as AD 90-95 which, if correct, scarcely leaves time for Clement to obtain a copy and assimilate its contents.

[104] cf. *2 Clem.* 3.2 which bears some redactional features of Matt. 10:32 and is therefore probably dependent on the Gospel of Matthew.

Christian oral traditions as from a written gospel.[105] Similarly, at *2 Clem.* 8.5, the author invokes the formula "For the Lord says in the gospel" (λέγει γὰρ ὁ κύριος ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ) to introduce a saying of Jesus. The quote is similar to, but not identical with, the canonical tradition at Luke 16:10-12, so it is quite probable that what we have here is simply a loose rendition of the Third Gospel.[106] It is, however, also possible that *2 Clement* is relying on oral tradition, a non-canonical text he knew as "the gospel," or some combination of all of these. Certainty is not attainable.

Moreover, the author of *2 Clement* does seem to have had access to a range of extra-canonical gospel materials which he regarded as having an authority similar to that of the written gospel source cited at *2 Clem.* 2.4. At *2 Clem.* 4.5 and 12.2, for example, the author introduces sayings of Jesus, paralleled in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, with the formula "the Lord said" (εἶπεν ὁ κύριος).[107] And similarly, at *2 Clem.* 11.2 a "prophetic word" not known from the NT canon is cited with authority.[108] In both of these cases, it is difficult to determine whether the author had access to the apocryphal gospels as written texts, or alternatively to a common oral tradition.

Clearly, distinguishing between oral gospel traditions and various kinds of gospel texts as they appear in *1 Clement* and *2 Clement* is no easy task. It is, indeed, made all the more difficult by the fact that neither of these texts, nor any of the Apostolic Fathers for that matter, ever cite a gospel source by name. The problems we have noted with regard to *1 Clement* and *2 Clement* are, therefore, repeated in numerous instances across the Apostolic Fathers, and this fact testifies to the complexity of the situation during the second century.

2. The Use of Gospels Materials in the Apostolic Fathers: Some Patterns and Tendencies

The various Apostolic Fathers used gospel materials in different ways and to varying extents. This is abundantly evident, for example, in the contrast between the *Didache*, which is rich with citations from, and allusions to, certain strands of gospel tradition, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which makes only limited use of gospel materials.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some generalizations about the use of

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[105] cf. *2 Clem.* 9.6 which may be indebted to John 13:34.

[106] *2 Clem.* 8.5: "For the Lord says in the gospel, 'If you do not keep what is small, who will give you what is great? For I say to you that the one who is faithful in very little is faithful also in much.'" The second sentence in the quote is identical to Luke 16:10, but the first sentence does not resemble any known source.

[107] A shorter version of the saying at *2 Clem.* 12.2 is found in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* 3.13.92, where it is attributed to the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. A longer form of the saying is found at *Gospel of Thomas* 22. The source of the saying at *2 Clem.* 4.5 is unknown. For discussion, see T. Baarda, "2 Clement and the Sayings of Jesus," in J. Delobel, ed., *Logia: Les Paroles de Jésus—The Sayings of Jesus* (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), pp. 529-56.

[108] Cf. the same word, referred to as "this scripture" (ἡ γραφὴ αὕτη), at *1 Clem.* 23.3.

gospel materials in these texts. At the most basic level, it is clear that none of the Apostolic Fathers offers anything like a detailed commentary on a whole gospel.[109] They likewise provide no developed hermeneutical theory and, indeed, engage only little in any kind of explicit interpretation of the gospel traditions. This is not to say, however, that gospel materials were unimportant to the Apostolic Fathers. Rather, the tendency of these authors was to weave gospel traditions into the fabric of their works—often without even acknowledging the source—and to use them, as Joseph Trigg notes, as a kind of "specifically Christian language."[110]

What were the patterns in the Apostolic Fathers' use of this language? At least three tendencies may be identified, and briefly outlined, as follows.

(a) Synoptic more than Johannine Traditions

First, as *Table 2* clearly demonstrates, the gospel materials present in the Apostolic Fathers consistently reflect synoptic more than Johannine traditions.

Text	Instances of traditions similar to. . .			
	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
1 Clem.	4	3	4	0
2 Clem.	10	8	8	1
Ignatius	8	1	2	5
Polycarp	5	2	5	0
Mart. Pol.	2	2	2	0
Didache	20	4	10	0
Barnabas	3	2	1	1
Hermas	0	0	0	0
Diognetus	1	0	0	0
Papias	0	0	1	1
Total	53	22	33	8

Table 2: Gospel materials in the Apostolic Fathers.[111]

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[109] The first Christian commentary on a gospel was written by the Gnostic Heracleon (on the Gospel of John) in the middle of the second century. Irenaeus certainly showed interest in the individual characteristics of each of the four gospels, but it was not really until Origen (c. AD 185–254) wrote his commentary on Matthew that gospel commentaries began to emerge as a recognizable genre of Christian literature. See M. Bockmuehl, "The Making of Gospel Commentaries," in M. Bockmuehl and D. A. Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 274-95.

[110] J. W. Trigg, "The Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists," in A. J. Hauser, D. F. Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume 1—The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 304-33: here, p. 305.

[111] The table reflects references to gospels materials in the Apostolic Fathers identified in the footnotes of Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*. It provides only a rough measure, and two important limitations must be noted. i. Holmes' footnotes identify instances where traditions similar to

Out of a possible 116 references to gospel materials in the Apostolic Fathers, only eight involve traditions known to us from the Gospel of John. Thus, despite the tendency of later patristic authors to privilege the Gospels of Matthew and John as those written by apostles of Jesus,[112] the earlier use of gospel traditions in the Apostolic Fathers exhibits no such emphasis on Johannine material.

The one exception to this rule is Ignatius of Antioch who seems to use Johannine language at a number of points. He speaks of "the bread of God,"[113] of "God in man" or perhaps—as in some manuscripts—"God come in flesh,"[114] of "water living and speaking in me,"[115] of God's Spirit which "knows from where it comes and where it is going,"[116] and of the "High Priest" (= Jesus) who is "the door of the Father."[117] While none of these allusions is strong enough to demonstrate direct literary dependence on the Fourth Gospel, it does seem likely that Ignatius had been influenced by Johannine traditions in some form.[118] Nevertheless, even Ignatius makes more use of synoptic than Johannine traditions.

It seems, then, that the synoptic traditions about Jesus (whether in written or oral form) were more widely known to the Apostolic Fathers than their Johannine counterparts. Indeed, outside of Ignatius, none of the remaining possible allusions to Johannine tradition is unambiguous.[119]

(b) Words of Jesus more than His Deeds

Second, the vast majority of references to gospel materials in the Apostolic Fathers take the form of quotations of, or allusions to, the *words* of Jesus. Apart from references to Jesus' death and resurrection, remarkably little mention is made of the gospel story as a whole. Likewise, individual narratives of Jesus' deeds—whether his symbolic acts or his mighty works of healing and exorcism—receive little attention. Gospel traditions about the

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those in the four canonical gospels seem to be reflected in the texts of the Apostolic Fathers. The table therefore reflects a whole range of possible relationships (from verbatim quotation to probable allusion) between the existing gospel traditions in their various forms (whether oral or written) and the texts of the Apostolic Fathers. It is not a count of citations from the canonical gospels. ii. It is often the case that the gospel materials incorporated by any given author reflect the tradition as it is preserved in two or more gospels. Where this is the case, the reference has been counted once under each possible gospel, thus distorting the numbers somewhat. Despite these limitations, however, the table is included here as rough indication of the frequency with which gospel materials we know from the canonical gospels were cited by the Apostolic Fathers.

[112] See S. R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1982–83*, vol. 7 (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1994), Appendix B, pp. 260-62.

[113] Ignatius, *Eph*. 5.2 cf. John 6:33.

[114] Ignatius, *Eph*. 7.2 cf. John 1:14.

[115] Ignatius, *Rom*. 7.2 cf. John 4:10, 14.

[116] Ignatius, *Phld*. 7.1 cf. John 3:8.

[117] Ignatius, *Phld*. 9.1 cf. John 10:9.

[118] Schoedel, *Ignatius*, p. 206.

[119] *2 Clem*. 17.5 (cf. John 8:24, 28; 13:19); *Barn*. 12.7 (cf. John 3:14-15); Papias *apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 3:39 (cf. John 7:53–8:11).

words of Jesus, however, are often woven into the texts of the Apostolic Fathers. And, what is more, while certain extended parables of Jesus are referred to at some points,[120] it is the aphoristic sayings of Jesus which dominate the landscape of these texts.

Three examples must suffice to illustrate the point. To begin with the Didachist underlines his call to humility with a word of Jesus also reflected in Matt. 5:5: "My child, do not be a grumbler, since it leads to blasphemy. Do not be arrogant or evil minded, for all these things breed blasphemies. Instead, be humble, for "the humble [οἱ πραεῖς] shall inherit the earth."[121]

Similarly, Ignatius of Antioch uses a pithy saying from the gospel tradition to address the problem of false teachers in the Ephesian church of his day: "No one professing faith sins, nor does anyone possessing love hate. 'The tree is known by its fruit' thus those who profess to be Christ's will be recognized by their actions."[122]

And, in the same way, Polycarp of Smyrna exhorts the Philippian church in words drawn from the "sayings of the Lord":

> [T]he Lord said as he taught: "Do not judge, that you may not be judged; forgive, and you will be forgiven; show mercy, that you may be shown mercy; with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you"; and, "blessed are the poor and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God."[123]

Examples of this kind of reference to the aphoristic words of Jesus abound in the Apostolic Fathers.[124]

This is not to say that the Apostolic Fathers contain no references to the narrative elements of the gospel tradition. Ignatius makes much of the significance of the star of Bethlehem as a sign of the dawning of a new age.[125] He offers a brief allegorical interpretation of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany.[126] And he makes mention, in a semi-credal statement, of Jesus' virgin birth, baptism by John, crucifixion under Pilate and Herod, and bodily appearances after the resurrection.[127] Likewise, the account of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* seems to have been deliberately modeled on the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion, and delights in depicting parallels between the deaths of

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[120] E.g. *1 Clem*. 24.5 alludes to the parable of the Sower found at Matt. 13:3-8/Mark 4:3-8/Luke 8:5-8.

[121] *Did*. 3.6-7.

[122] Ignatius, *Eph*. 14.2 (cf. Matt. 12:33/Luke 6:44).

[123] Polycarp, *Phil*. 2.2-3 (cf. Matt. 7:1-2/Luke 6:36-38 and Matt. 5:3, 10/Luke 6:20). A tradition similar to Matt. 7:1-2 is also referred to at *1 Clem*. 13.2. Further discussion in B. Dehandschutter, "Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians: An Early Example of 'Reception,'" in J.-M. Sevrin, ed., *The New Testament in Early Christianity* (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), pp. 275-91.

[124] Further examples may be found at: *1 Clem*. 13.2; 46.8; *2 Clem*. 3.2; 4.2; 5.4; 6.1; 7.6; 9.11; 13.4; Ignatius, *Smyrn*. 6.1; *Trall*. 11.1; *Poly*. 2.2; Polycarp, *Phil*. 2.2-3; 5.2; 7.2; 12.3; *Did*. 1.2-5; 3.7; 7.1; 8.2; 9.5; 11.7; 13.2; 16.1, 4-6, 8; *Barn*. 4.14; 5.12; 12.7; *Diogn*. 9.6.

[125] Ignatius, *Eph*. 19.2-3 (cf. Matt. 2:2, 7, 9-10).

[126] Ignatius, *Eph*. 17.1 (cf. Matt. 26:7; Mark 14:3).

[127] Ignatius, *Smyrn*. 1.1-3.3 (cf. Matt. 3:15; Luke 24:39).

Polycarp and Jesus.[128]

Nevertheless, such allusions to narrative elements in the gospel tradition are the exception rather than the rule in the Apostolic Fathers, and it is the sayings of Jesus which most frequently provide the "specifically Christian language" as it appears in these texts.

(c) Practical Instruction more than Theological Reflection

A final tendency evident in the Apostolic Fathers is that gospel materials are employed to the end of practical instruction more than they are used as a basis for theological reflection.

To begin with, gospel traditions are used by the Apostolic Fathers as a legitimating source of authority for church practices. The *Didache*, for example: provides instruction for prayer in line with what "the Lord commanded in his gospel" (*Did.* 8.2, cf. Matt. 6:9-13); links teaching about baptism to a trinitarian formula the same as that recorded in Matt. 28:19 (*Did.* 7.1); asserts that "every genuine teacher is. . . worthy of his food" in a manner reminiscent of Matt. 10:10 (*Did.* 13.2); and warns against allowing unbaptized persons to participate in the Eucharist on the basis of what "the Lord has also spoken concerning this: 'Do not give what is holy to dogs'" (*Did.* 9.5, cf. Matt. 7:6).

In addition, the Apostolic Fathers regularly use gospel materials as the authoritative ground for moral exhortation. Clement, for example, warns his Corinthian correspondants against schism on the basis of "words of Jesus our Lord" like those in Matt. 18:6; 26:24 and parallels (*1 Clem.* 46.8). Polycarp, likewise, takes up the language of Jesus at Matt. 5:44/Luke 6:27 in encouraging the Philippian Christians to pray "for those who persecute and hate you." And the *Didache*, in the most striking example of all, creates a rich collage of gospel traditions in order to contrast—in almost exclusively ethical terms—the "way of life" with the "way of death" (*Did.* 1.1-6).

Certainly, the Apostolic Fathers were capable, on occasion, of using gospel traditions as the ground for theological reflection. In one remarkable passage, for example, Clement creatively combines the Pauline "first fruits" imagery with the parable of the Sower to reflect on the nature of the future resurrection (*1 Clem.* 24.1-5). And *Barnabas*, similarly, takes Zechariah's (Zech. 13.7) image of the shepherd being struck and the sheep scattered—which appears in the canonical gospels as a prophecy of the desertion of the disciples—and incorporates it into a reflection on the salvific significance of Jesus' death.[129] These are, however, rare examples of theological reflection around gospel traditions. Much more characteristic in the Apostolic Fathers is the use of gospel materials to buttress ecclesiastical practices and moral

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[128] Like Jesus, Polycarp: waited to be betrayed (*Mart. Pol.* 1.2); predicted his death (5.2); prayed earnestly before his arrest (7.2-3); asked that God's will be done (7.1); was arrested as though he were an armed rebel (7.1); was executed under an official named Herod (6.2); rode into town on a donkey (8.3), and so on.

[129] *Barn.* 5.12 (cf. Matt. 26:31/Mark 14:27).

injunctions.

3. Summary: Gospel Traditions in the Apostolic Fathers

The Apostolic Fathers stand at a pivotal point in the development of gospel traditions in the early church. It seems that most of these authors had access to gospel materials in a range of forms (oral and written, canonical and extra-canonical) and made use of the material at their disposal to serve the practical needs of the churches to whom and for whom they wrote. If an explanation is sought, then, for the patterns and tendencies just outlined, it is not necessary to look beyond the occasional nature of these works and the multiplicity of forms in which gospel materials were available in the first half of the second century.

C. Conclusion

Gospel traditions occupy an important place in the early Christian literature. Memories of the words and deeds of Jesus were preserved and transmitted in the early churches by a range of historical processes which produced a variety of "gospel" forms. During the course of the second century, the four most ancient written gospels, which had been accorded a unique authority from the beginning, emerged at the center of these gospel traditions as the authoritative fourfold gospel we know from the NT. At the same time, early Christian authors wove strands of gospel material into the fabric of their own works, and thereby further contributed to the rich vibrancy of the gospel tapestry. The breadth and strength of the gospel traditions in this period are testimony to the remarkable impact Jesus of Nazareth had on the generations who followed him.

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