

# The 'Gospel' and the Emperor Cult

From Bultmann to Crossan

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A mini-trajectory of change is what I trace here, highlighting a shift from Rudolf Bultmann's doubts about the (extent of) cultural relativity between "gospel (Greek εὐαγγέλιον [singular]; 'good news' or 'good tidings')" as used in the New Testament and related writings and "gospel (εὐαγγέλια/εὐαγγελία<sup>1</sup> [usually plural])" as used in Greco-Roman culture, to an emphasis on the conflict between the two in the writings of John Dominic Crossan.

To clarify terminology, "gospel (εὐαγγέλιον)" (uncapitalized<sup>2</sup>) refers here to a message of good news (usually<sup>3</sup>), "Gospel" (capitalized) to the title of a book, that is, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Thomas, etc. My main interest is not in pointing to nuances of "gospel" meaning between, say, Paul the apostle and (the Gospel of) Mark in the New Testament, part of the infrastructure of Jesus movement/early Christian understandings of gospel,<sup>4</sup> but in underscoring the probable awareness of early Christian storytellers and writers, with Mark as a typical case, about "gospel" in their contexts and "gospel" in the wider Greco-Roman culture. Along the way, the idea of "gospel" as expressed in the Sayings Gospel Q, foundational to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, will be referenced with its prophetic Old Testament (Isaiah) relationships.

1. Εὐαγγελίων (genitive plural neuter, from nominative εὐαγγέλια) is the word in the Priene inscription (Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 366, referring to his photograph of the white marble stone and to Dittenberger, *Inscriptiones*, no. 458). Other spellings by scholars are adjustments to the text. Εὐαγγελίας (genitive singular feminine, from nominative εὐαγγελία) is also found (4 Kgdms 7:9).

2. Except, of course, in the title of this article, secondary-source quotations, and similar expressions.

3. Except, e.g., when the message of good news arguably means only "news," as in the message to King David about a resident alien's (Amalekite's) mercy killing of the wounded King Saul, requested by Saul lest the Philistines finish him off. This (good?) news is supposed to please David, but he turns on the Amalekite, who has brought him the message, and orders him killed (2 Kgdms 4:10; cf. Koester, who thinks it means here "reward for good news" [*Ancient Christian Gospels*, 2 n. 3]).

4. Whether Paul or Mark matters to specialist scholars, but little to popular audience, i.e., most of the Christian world. As in much scholarship on the earliest "Jesus movements," we use the word "Christian" to apply sometimes anachronistically also to these so-called movements; where necessary, further clarification is provided.

For the larger picture beyond the first century CE, continuing evidence of the contrasting Christian and imperial usages, a late-second-century author will be mentioned, providing a “smoking gun” beyond the circumstantial cultural inferences in vogue in recent scholarship.

### **Koester, Bultmann, and Priene**

Helmut Koester, in his magisterial *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (1990),<sup>5</sup> analyzes in exhaustive detail and with citation of scholarship old and new “1.1 The Origin of the Term ‘Gospel’” (pp. 1–4); “1.2 The Use of the Term ‘Gospel’ in the Pauline Tradition” (4–9); “1.3 The Term ‘Gospel’ in the Gospels of the New Testament” (9–14); “1.4 ‘Gospel’ in the Apostolic Fathers” (14–20); and “1.5 The Term ‘Gospel’ in Gospels from the Nag Hammadi Library” (20–23). Discussed under “Origin,” the aspect that concerns us here is the use of the term in the imperial inscriptions, for example, typically, Priene, Turkey (9 BCE Asia Minor, 21 miles south of Kusadasi, 33 south of Ephesus), raising the question of the influence of the Roman emperor cult on the earliest usage by Jesus’ followers. Koester writes:

Most of these inscriptions are related to the introduction of the Julian calendar, that is, the calendar of Julius Caesar [100–44 BCE; ruled 49–44 BCE], which was generally introduced in the Roman world during the time of Augustus [63 BCE–14 CE; ruled 27 BCE–14 CE]. The inscription from Priene (9 BCE) is probably the most famous among these calendar inscriptions. It celebrates the benefactions which have come into the world through Augustus, whom divine providence has sent as a savior (σωτήρ) and who has brought the wars to an end and established an order of peace:

. . . and since the Caesar through his appearances (ἐπιφανεῖν) has exceeded the hopes of all former good messages (εὐαγγέλια), surpassing the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good messages (. . . εὐαγγελίων . . .) [may it therefore be decided that . . .].<sup>6</sup>

All these inscriptions result from the religio-political propaganda of Augustus in which the rule of peace, initiated by Augustus’s victories and benefactions, is celebrated and proclaimed as the beginning of a new age. The usage of the term εὐαγγέλιον is new in the Greco-Roman world. It elevates this term and equips it with a particular dignity. Since the Christian usage of the term for its saving message begins only a few decades after the time of Augustus, it is most likely that

5. A Koester article leading into this book is “From Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels.” For the extensive archaeological background of Koester’s research, see Schowalter, “Koester’s Archaeological Path.”

6. For other translations of part of the inscription including “for the world the birthday of the god, . . .” see pages 70 (Deissmann), 73 (Crossan), and 75–76 (Evans, with comparison to Mark 1:1) below.

the early Christian missionaries were influenced by the imperial propaganda in their employment of the word.<sup>7</sup>

As a footnote at the end of this quotation, Koester adds:

Most scholars are very hesitant to see a connection of the early-Christian use and the employment of the term in the imperial propaganda; e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1951–1955) 1.87.

In the next footnote Koester comments:

It is very difficult to establish evidence for a pre-Pauline Christian usage of these terms, pace Stuhlmacher (*Das paulinische Evangelium*, 209–44)[,] who discusses Rev 10:7, 14:6; Matt 11:5 (= Luke 7:22); Luke 4:18; Mark 1:14; and Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 16:13 as possible evidence for the use of εὐαγγέλιον and εὐαγγελίζεσθαι by the Palestinian church, possibly by Jesus himself.<sup>8</sup> It is more probable that the Pauline use of the terms derives from the early Hellenistic church from which Paul derives such kerygmatic formulations, called 'gospel,' as 1 Thess 1:9–10 and 1 Cor 15:3–5; cf. Bultmann, *Theology*, 87–89.

When we turn to Bultmann's *Theology* itself, we find the surprising comments, helping to clarify what he means by "absolute" (also showing why reading him may still be useful as a point of departure):

The substantive "evangel" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) soon appears in Hellenistic Christianity as the technical term for the Christian proclamation, and for the act of proclaiming the verb εὐαγγελίζεσθαι was used. . . .

"Evangel" (or its verb) is strictly a technical term only when it is absolute—that is, used without any object of content to designate the Christian message, but simply implying its clearly defined content. This usage of Paul, which in his footsteps became widely current, has no analogy either in the Old Testament and Judaism or in Gentile Hellenism, and *the wide-spread view that "evangel" is a sacral term of the emperor-cult cannot be maintained* [italics added]. This absolute use of the word seems to have developed in Hellenistic Christianity gradually, but relatively quickly. In many cases "evangel" is limited by an objective genitive (e.g. "of the Kingdom," Mt. 4:23, 9:35 or "of Christ," Rom. 15:19, I Cor. 9:12, etc.) or the verb is supplemented by an object of content (e.g. the "Reign of God," Lk. 4:43, "Jesus" or an equivalent expression, Acts 5:42, 8:35, Gal. 1:15, etc.; or "faith," Gal. 1:23, etc.).

*Whether the absolute use is earlier than Paul cannot be said with certainty. Evidently it does not go back as far as the earliest Church* [italics added]; for the substantive εὐαγγέλιον, lacking entirely in Q, is found in Mark only in secondary formations (in Matthew partly following Mark, partly in phrases peculiar to Matthew). It is absent from Luke but occurs twice in Acts. Among these occurrences it is used technically, i.e., absolutely, in these cases: Mk. 1:15, 8:35, 10:29, 13:10, 14:9,

7. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 3–4.

8. Especially Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22 (= Q 7:22) will be discussed below, in the subsection, "The earliest form(s) of the gospel." Stuhlmacher's views continue to be part of the scholarly conversation; see also his *Gospel and Gospels*.

Mt. 26:13, Acts 15:7. The verb, in the passive voice, is used once in Q (Mt. 11:5 = Lk. 7:22) quoting Is. 61:1, is lacking in Mark and Matthew, but frequent in Luke and Acts, though technical only in the following cases: Lk. 9:6 (20:1), Acts 8:25, 40; 14:7, 21; 16:10. In the New Testament, outside of the synoptics, Acts, and Paul, the noun occurs in the technical use only in the deutero-Pauline writings (II Thess., Col., Eph., Past.); the verb occurs technically I Pet. 1:12, 4:6, Heb. 4:2, 6. Not infrequently (especially in Paul) "of God" as a subjective genitive or genitive of the author is added. Not only from Luke but also from the following the noun is completely absent: Jn., I-III Jn., Heb., Jas., Jd., II Pet., Rev. (here the word occurs only in a different sense, 14:6). The verb is absent from Mark and Matthew and the following: Jn., I-III Jn., Past., Jas., Jd., II Pet., Rev. . . .

The technical use of κήρυγμα, "the message," and κηρῦσσειν, "to herald," developed quite analogously.<sup>9</sup>

The details of all these passages need not concern us here,<sup>10</sup> except as they demonstrate that Bultmann makes a distinction between the "absolute" or "technical" noun εὐαγγέλιον and the verb εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, and allows that the verb too may be used in a technical sense. He seems to be giving the absolute εὐαγγέλιον a privileged status and is perhaps influenced in that direction by his understanding of the importance of preaching, that is, clearly articulating the Pauline gospel message, as well as by Martin Luther's interpretation of Paul. But Bultmann has ignored, or not sufficiently heeded, the significance of the imperial inscription at Priene and other widespread images of Roman imperial theology. Problems with Bultmann's view also become apparent when the absence or meager use of the noun εὐαγγέλιον or the verb εὐαγγελίζεσθαι in an absolute sense seems to have little or no relation to the existence or vitality of some New Testament and other early Christian or Jewish Christian communities (i.e., communities without a specifically Pauline kerygmatic formulation). The question may be raised whether Bultmann has overloaded the technical noun in distinction from the verb, tending to negate other dynamic gospel meanings that may stem from Jesus and/or his earliest followers.

There must have been a form of the gospel from Jesus himself that did not include his suffering, death, and the experiences of his resurrection as in the "absolute" Pauline kerygma. How could Jesus' original gospel include his death and resurrection if he was not dead yet? From Jesus' many parables, we know that his original gospel was the gospel of the kingdom of God (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ). What he was talking about was the rule of God versus the rule of Caesar. Yet the variations that soon developed among his followers, after his death and

9. British edition 1952, 87–88. Koester proceeds on the basis of Bultmann's meaning of "absolute" when he notes that, of 48 occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in the genuine Pauline letters, 26 are "absolute, without a following genitive; fourteen times the genitive 'of God' (τοῦ θεοῦ) or 'of Christ' (τοῦ Χριστοῦ) follows" (*Ancient Christian Gospels*, 4–5 n. 4).

10. For Q (Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22, εὐαγγελίζονται [Isa 61:1 LXX, εὐαγγελίσασθαι]), again, and other references, see the subsections below, "The Earliest Form(s) of the Gospel" and "Singular εὐαγγέλιον and Plural εὐαγγέλια."

perhaps even before, comprise the infrastructure of the earliest Christian movements.

So with the impetus of research on Q, it seems appropriate to recognize that other gospels stemming from Jesus and his earliest followers were considered gospel, and that the pre-Pauline gentile form, the Pauline form, and the Jewish Christian or Christian Jewish forms were all part of the pluralistic infrastructure stemming from Jesus and his earliest followers. And this same infrastructure, with roots in the prophetic tradition of Israel, provides a basic contrast to Greco-Roman culture. We can proceed then to the wider picture of early Christianity vis-à-vis Greco-Roman culture that was painted by Adolf Deissmann in 1922 (earlier, too, from 1905), grounded in his research on both the Septuagint and Greco-Roman culture, underscored by Gerhard Friedrich in 1964,<sup>11</sup> and emphasized in the last several decades by an increasing number of scholars, especially Crossan.

### Priene, Deissmann, and Crossan

That Bultmann ignored, or did not heed, the Priene and other inscriptions as influencing the New Testament formulations should not be surprising, since "until recently," according to Graham Stanton, such inquiries "were considered by many to be blind alleys."<sup>12</sup> And worse, "New Testament scholars who have taken the figure of the Roman emperor seriously have often found themselves the object of ridicule, and their interest regarded as, at best, somewhat eccentric."<sup>13</sup> The most important of the inscriptions, Stanton goes on,

is still the so-called Priene inscription, the first fragments of which were published in 1899. Adolf Deissmann's discussion of this inscription in his *Licht vom Osten* (1908) led to a flurry of interest in the imperial cult. This book was quickly translated into English as *Light from the Ancient East* . . . (1910). It remains a classic, in spite of more recent discoveries and discussions.

Much has happened since Deissmann's day, though little has filtered through to the standard New Testament lexicons and handbooks. Many more fragments

11. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (in preparation, 1905; 1st ed., 1908; 4th ed., 1922); Friedrich, "εὐαγγέλιον," 725. For development after Friedrich, see various articles by Strecker, culminating in his "εὐαγγέλιον," cited in Stuhlmacher, "Pauline Gospel," who calls Strecker "the chief representative" (151 n. 11) of those who "insist . . . that the missionary expression εὐαγγέλιον, which is not in the Septuagint, must be explained (in distinction from the verb [εὐαγγελίζεσθαι], especially from Greek linguistic tradition and indeed above all from that pertaining to the imperial cult" (151).

12. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 30.

13. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 30 n. 60, summarizing Meggitt, "New Testament and Roman Emperor," 143–69; Koester (*Ancient Christian Gospels*, 4 n. 2) confirms contrary opinion: "Most scholars are very hesitant to see a connection of the early-Christian use and the employment of the term in the imperial propaganda," citing Bultmann (*Theology*, 1.87) among others.

of this inscription have been discovered; we now have thirteen in all, from five cities in Asia Minor: Priene, Apamea, Maeonia, Eumonia, and Dorylaeum.<sup>14</sup> This inscription was displayed prominently in Greek and in Latin in many more than these five places, not only in the larger cities, but also in less populated areas. Only the well-known *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the emperor's [Augustus's] own catalogue of his achievements for the whole Roman Empire, had an even greater impact in the first century AD. Copies of the *Res Gestae* in Latin (and often with a Greek translation or paraphrase) were erected on stone blocks in the cities and towns of Asia Minor, and probably also in Galatia at the instigation of the provincial Assembly or *koinon* c. AD 19.<sup>15</sup>

The usual title, 'Priene inscription', is something of a misnomer. Priene, which is about halfway between Ephesus and Miletus, happened to be the place where the first discovery was made; the fragments found in the other four cities were less substantial, but that is sheer chance. When the Ephesian elders travelled to meet with Paul at Miletus (Acts 20.15–17), they may well have broken their journey at Priene.<sup>16</sup>

Deissmann argued strongly that the language lexicographers used to distinguish New Testament Greek and the common (*koinē*) Greek of the culture was a false dichotomy. New Testament Greek *is* the ordinary language of the culture, and thus you cannot privilege New Testament words and expressions as if they are conveying a unique and separate meaning. True, combinations of the words may result in discrete meanings, but the language has an identical cultural base. It seems obvious, but needs to be reasserted: that's why it's called *koinē*. Deissmann writes:

A generation ago [1898<sup>17</sup>], when it began to be asserted with some confidence that the isolation of "New Testament" Greek as a separate entity was impossible from the scientific point of view, since it was practically identical with the popular international Greek of the period, theologians and philologists received the statement with more or less active dissent. . . . Since then, however, the specialists have changed their minds on this not unimportant point. New Testament philology has been revolutionised; and probably all the workers concerned in it both on the Continent and in English-speaking countries are by this time agreed that the starting-point for the philological investigation of the New Testament must be the language of the non-literary papyri, ostraca, and inscriptions. . . . In many details due emphasis was given to [the] relation [of New Testament

14. Laffi, "Iscrizioni 9 a.C.," is "[t]he most comprehensive critical edition and discussion of all the fragments"; Sherk, *Roman Documents*, 328–37, provides "an edition of the Greek text, notes, bibliography, and brief discussion" (Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 30 n. 61).

15. See Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*; also Mitchell, "Galatia under Tiberius," per Witulski, *Adressaten des Galaterbriefes*, 147 (Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 30 n. 62).

16. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 30.

17. Since Deissmann was probably revising his fourth edition, published 1922, and footnotes from his 1898 publication.

language] with the contemporary international Greek, but on the whole it was isolated by the science of language, and raised to the rank of a separate linguistic entity under the title of "New Testament" Greek. . . . From the point of view of religion and theology the isolation of the New Testament was encouraged by the doctrine of mechanical inspiration, combining with a very lively conception of the canon of the New Testament as a hard-and-fast boundary.<sup>18</sup>

Deissmann later proceeds, citing extensive research including his own, to offer "a selection of characteristic parallelisms" to either imperial law or the imperial cult, the latter of which "was in fact a portion of" Roman constitutional law,<sup>19</sup> including the words "God (θεός),"<sup>20</sup> "god of god,"<sup>21</sup> and "son of God (θεου υἱός)."<sup>22</sup> A marble pedestal at Pergamum honors Emperor Augustus while he is still alive: "[The] Emperor[,] Caesar[,] son of [a] god[,] [the] god Augustus[,] of every land and sea the overseer" (brackets added). A votive inscription in St. Paul's time on a marble slab at Magnesia on the Maeander River calls Emperor Nero, between his adoption 50 CE by Claudius (emperor 41–54 CE) and his accession to the throne (54 CE), "Son of the greatest of the gods, Tiberius Claudius." "Divine (θεῖος)" is a frequent adjective used of Augustus, as in the calendar inscription of Priene (9 BCE), which speaks of the birthday of "the most divine Caesar."<sup>23</sup> "Divine" and "divinity" even persist into the sixth century CE, applying to Christian emperors the old language of religious observance. The title "theologian (θεολογός)," the usual *Inscriptio* at the beginning of the book of Revelation in the majority of manuscripts, is "likely to have been borrowed from the Imperial cult. The *theologi* . . . were quite well-known dignitaries in the Imperial cult of Asia Minor, against which the Apocalypse protests so strongly. . . . These 'theologians' seem occasionally to have borne the name of *sebastologi* [σεβαστολογοι; Caesar-logians, JD], as being the official special preachers in connexion with the Imperial cult in Asia Minor."<sup>24</sup>

18. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 62–63, 67 (62–145 is on language).

19. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 343.

20. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 343–46. My current reprint copy of Deissmann's book has Greek words in Greek letters but only partial diacritics, so I may occasionally cite with partial diacritics or in English transliteration the Greek words he uses. The inscriptions, of course, had minimal diacritics, if any.

21. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 344–45. This appellation applies to Augustus the ancient title of the Egyptian divine Horus, child of divine Isis and divine Osiris (see also Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 144). It is a reminder, too, of late-first-century Johannine theology, suggesting that the reading "only-begotten God" (John 1:18), referring to Jesus and understood accordingly by both the second-century Valentinian Ptolemy (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.8.5) and Origen (*Commentary on John* 2.29; *Against Celsus* 2.71; 8.17) has anti-imperial implications. Origen provides the rebuttal: "'All the gods of the heathens' (Ps 95:5 LXX) are gluttonous daemons" (*Against Celsus* 3.37).

22. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 346–47.

23. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 347–48.

24. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 348–49.

Deissmann emphasizes “the early establishment of a polemical parallelism between the cult of Christ and the cult of Caesar” in the application of the terms “lord (κυριος),”<sup>25</sup> “Lord and God (κυριος και θεός),”<sup>26</sup> “King (βασιλεύς),”<sup>27</sup> “Saviour (σωτηρ),”<sup>28</sup> and “Saviour of the world.”<sup>29</sup> For our purposes, the most important example concerns Priene, proving to Deissmann that

the word *ευαγγελιον*[sic], “gospel, good tidings,” which was in use in pre-Christian times in the profane sense of good news, and which then became a Primitive Christian cult-word of the first order, was also employed in the Imperial cult. The oldest example is that calendar inscription of Priene, about 9 B.C., . . . which is now in the Berlin Museum. Discovered by German archaeologists on two stones of different kind in the north hall of the market-place at Priene, and published for the first time by Theodor Mommsen and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff . . . , this inscription, designed to introduce the Asian calendar, has already been appreciated by Adolf Harnack and Paul Wendland as of great importance in the history of the sacred language of Asia Minor. . . . Here we find this remarkable sentence referring to the birthday of the Emperor Augustus: . . . “But the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of tidings of joy (*εὐανγελί[ων]*) on his account.”<sup>30</sup>

The neuter plural *euangelia* (*εὐανγέλια*; genitive *εὐανγελίων*) seems to be the most frequent form used, but Deissmann also found the singular, though more than two centuries later (after 235 CE), referring to the gospel or “tidings of joy (*εὐανγελ[ιο]υ*) concerning the proclaiming as Emperor of Gaius Julius Verus Maximus Augustus [Maximinus Thrax, c. 173–238; ruled 235–238], the son of our lord (*κυρίου*), most dear to the gods, the Emperor Caesar Gaius Julius Verus Maximinus, pious, happy, and Augustus.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite Bultmann’s reluctance, Gerhard Friedrich, building on the work of his teacher Julius Schniewind (who had reservations about Bultmann’s demythologizing), did not hesitate to articulate the contrasting worldviews toward peace elucidated by Deissmann, preaching a little in the process:

The Imperial cult and the Bible share the view that accession to the throne, which introduces a new era and brings peace to the world, is a gospel for men [sic]. We can explain this only by supposing a common source. This is generally oriental. To the many messages, however, the NT opposes the one Gospel, to the many accessions the one proclamation of the *βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ* [kingdom of God]. The NT speaks the language of its day. It is a popular and realistic procla-

25. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 349, 350–60; see also Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 166.

26. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 361–62.

27. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 362–63.

28. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 363–64.

29. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 364–65.

30. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 366.

31. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 367.

mation. It knows human waiting for and hope of the εὐαγγέλια, and it replies with the εὐαγγέλιον, but with an evangel of which some might be ashamed, since it is a σκάνδαλον [stumbling block] (Mt. 11:5f; R. 1:16; 1 C. 1:17, 23; 2 Tm. 1:8; Mk. 8:35). The Gospel means for men [sic] σωτηρία [salvation], but σωτηρία through μετάνοια and judgment. For many this Gospel may be ironical when they hear it (cf. Ac. 17:32). But it is real joy; for penitence brings joy, and judgment grace and salvation. Caesar and Christ, the emperor on the throne and the despised rabbi on the cross, confront one another. Both are evangel to men [sic]. They have much in common. But they belong to different worlds.<sup>32</sup>

It is not difficult to see Deissmann's influence on, even inspiration of, Crossan. We do not need to review his writings for members of the Jesus Seminar, the Society of Biblical Literature, or increasingly, the wider public. But it is hard to think of anyone who has done more to bring contemporary archaeology, anthropology, and other sciences to bear on the study of early Judaism and Christianity, and to combine high scholarship and literary grace in so doing.<sup>33</sup> It is also remarkable that, although on some specifics there has been, and likely will continue to be, disagreement, most would agree that the message of Jesus is one of justice and peace, and in that respect unifying and ecumenical. Crossan's and archaeologist Jonathan Reed's debt to Deissmann is clear from the beginning of their book *In Search of Paul* (2004), where they praise Deissmann for the "light" they are about to reflect. Both Crossan and Reed had been "to every place we discuss, and both of us . . . several times to certain places," and they "invite" readers "to imagine yourselves in those locations" (ix). A key section contrasting "The Gospel of Caesar Augustus as Lord" (236–69) and "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord" (270–91) gets to the point:

You drive today along the coastal road from ancient Miletus . . . to ancient Priene . . . . In Acts 20:15 Luke has Paul sailing into Miletus. He would have serious trouble sailing there today. But even with . . . changes of terrain, the mountains still stand to northwest and southeast overlooking that great valley, and the Aegean is still there, even if much farther to the west.

. . . [T]oday the classical sites of Turkey can be graded by how many tour buses are there at any one time. Ephesus has a minimum of twenty-five tour buses at a time. Aphrodisias has a maximum of five. And Priene has no buses most of the time. You come there on a sunny late September day in 2002 by taxi from Kusadasi and have the ruins almost all to yourself.

The towering Masada-like acropolis north of Priene makes the Acrocorinth or even the Acrophilippi look insignificant in comparison. It is warm that afternoon, but even at the site's entrance you are high enough for a good breeze, and it strengthens as you climb higher among the ruins to the Temple of Athena. You ponder insincerely and dismiss eventually any idea of climbing that towering

32. Friedrich, εὐαγγέλιον, 725.

33. For purposes of this study, the most important are Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus* and *In Search of Paul*; Crossan, *God and Empire* and *Power of Parable*.

acropolis. The view out over the Meander Valley is already spectacular enough, the site already difficult enough, and your purpose already specific enough.

Your focus is on the site where a by then fragmentary inscription from 9 B.C.E. was discovered by German archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century. Its two parts are now stored in Berlin's Pergamon Museum, and Gustav Adolf Deissmann's book shows their earliest pictures. Its original site is to the immediate north of the agora, or public square. A covered portico, or sacred stoa, long as a football field, once offered some shade from the relentless southern arch of the Mediterranean sun. At its eastern end was the *prytaneion*, the sacred hearth or eternal flame of the city's destiny, and to its immediate west was the *bouleuterion*, the meeting chamber and dining room of the city's council. We are, in other words, in the religio-political heart of the city. . . .

Continuing westward at Priene, the rest of the stoa opened into fifteen small but clearly distinguishable rooms whose walls are still halfway intact. You know that the inscription was originally in the ninth room from the west, the seventh from the east, and that the room has a wider entrance than those around it as well as a seat around the inside walls. It is easy enough to find that room once sacred to Augustus—it now has a rather large tree growing against the middle of its right side wall. The absent inscription is the fullest example of two documents known also from several other provincial cities of the Roman province of Asia. They contain the earliest and most striking instances of the term "gospel" or "good tidings" (*euaggelia*) used for Augustus in Roman imperial theology. And they contain in detail why exactly their content is good news for all creation. The texts given below are composite scholarly reconstructions integrating the Priene version with fragments discovered in four other Asian cities, for example, Apamea, where it was dug out of a garden in the mid-1920s.

The first part records how Paulus Fabius Maximus, Roman governor of Asia, proposed to the Asian League of cities that they change their calendar so that Augustus's birthday would be henceforth New Year's Day. Here are some key lines from his letter:

[It is a question whether] the birthday of the most divine Caesar is more pleasant or more advantageous, the day which we might justly set on a par with the beginning of everything, in practical terms at least, in that he restored order when everything was disintegrating and falling into chaos and gave a new look to the whole world, a world which would have met destruction with the utmost pleasure if Caesar had not been born as a common blessing to all. For that reason one might justly take this to be the beginning of life and living, the end of regret at one's birth. . . . It is my view that all the communities should have one and the same New Year's Day, the birthday of the most divine Caesar, and that on that day, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, all should enter their term of office.

The second part records the enthusiastic response and official decree establishing that calendrical change for everyone, but especially for the start of all civic magistracies. You can easily imagine the competitive public celebration that all those simultaneous inception necessitated. Here again are some key lines:

Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendants as a savior—he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings (*euaggelia*), not only outdoing benefactors of the past, but also allowing no hope of greater benefactions in the future; and since the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings (*euaggelia*) residing in him . . . . For that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided that the New Year in all the cities should begin on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, the birthday of Augustus . . . and that the letter of the proconsul and the decree of Asia should be inscribed on a pillar of white marble, which is to be placed in the sacred precinct of Rome and Augustus.<sup>34</sup>

Apparently as early as 29 B.C.E., that is, immediately after Augustus's victory at the battle of Actium, a golden crown had been decreed in the Roman province of Asia for whoever best honored Augustus, "our god," and, twenty years later, that diadem was given to the governor Paulus Fabius Maximus, who had "discovered a way to honor Augustus that was hitherto unknown among the Greeks, namely, to reckon time from the date of his nativity."

In the Roman province of Asia, to take just those two Priene inscriptions, the divine Augustus was not just lord of empire and earth, but also of calendar and time. Lord of history, therefore, since there never was before nor ever would be again good news or gospel (plural *euaggelia*) surpassing that which announced his birth. In every city of rich Roman Asia there was decreed, for all time past, present, and future, but one overwhelming gospel, the good news of Augustus's advent, epiphany, and presence, the good news of a global Lord, divine Son, and cosmic Savior.

A footnote. Just to the northwest of that sacred room are the ruins of what was once the oldest, largest, most magnificent, and most important of the city's several temples. It stood on an east-west axis atop high terraced support walls along a rocky spur and was visible from anywhere on the plains below. The architrave beam above its entrance now sits broken on the ground. But still proclaims in Greek capitals that "The people [dedicated it] to Athena Polias and to the World-Conqueror Caesar, the Son of God, the God Augustus."<sup>35</sup>

Even with this description, it is possible to minimize Crossan's and Reed's main thrust. So we underscore their affirmation: "We do insist," they say,

that the term "emperor cult" is much too narrow. That was, certainly, the core of Roman imperial theology. . . . It was that, of course, but only as the center of an entire world of meaning. What we stress throughout this book is not the

34. *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, no. 490; trans. Braund, *Sourcebook*, 122. See also Crossan, *God and Empire*, 147–48, for the two integrated Priene quotations.

35. Thanks to Crossan and Reed for this lengthy and moving quotation, found on pp. 237–42.

isolated peculiarity of emperor worship, but the integrated universality of imperial theology.<sup>36</sup>

How exactly did the peace of Rome differ from the peace of God? How exactly did the peace of the Lord Caesar Augustus, divine and Son of God, differ from the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ, also divine and also Son of God? This entire book is about the clash between those alternative visions of world peace. One is Augustus's vision, following civilization's normalcy, of *peace through victory*. The other is Paul's vision, following Jesus's radicality, of *peace through justice*.<sup>37</sup>

Neither Deissmann, Crossan, nor Reed, however, would argue that the imperial influence is the only one shaping the Christian expression. Rather, as Deissmann explains the broader linguistic scope, the

polemical parallelism between the cult of the emperor and the cult of Christ . . . makes itself felt where ancient words derived by Christianity from the treasury of the Septuagint and the Gospels happen to coincide with solemn concepts of the Imperial cult which sounded the same or similar. In many cases this polemical parallelism . . . may be established by very ancient witness. In other cases the word which corresponds with the Primitive Christian term of worship may turn up only in later texts relating to the cult of the emperor. It could hardly be otherwise considering the fragmentary nature of the tradition.<sup>38</sup>

### The Fragmentary Nature of the Tradition

It seems clear enough that a shift has occurred from an emphasis on Bultmann's "absolute" *euaggelion* to a better understanding via Crossan of the conflict between the main cultural forms of Christian and Roman identity, whether singular *euaggelion* or plural *euaggelia*. But the devil is often in the details, and we can address several matters that may make "the fragmentary nature of the tradition" more coherent.

### The Earliest Form(s) of the Gospel

Concerning the relation of the Priene inscriptions to the earliest form(s) of the gospel among Jesus' followers, the beginning of the Gospel of Mark seems more suggestive than the writings of Paul and/or his Hellenistic predecessors. The lat-

36. Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 188. See also Crossan, *God and Empire*, a book devoted to the application of a nonviolent gospel to contemporary American and world culture. None of the violent propensities of religious traditions or *their* empires, according to Crossan, are let off the hook by the authentic message of Jesus and Paul: "'If you live by the sword you will die by it' no longer applies minimally to Israel or maximally to Rome, but minimally to the world and maximally to the earth" (241).

37. Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 74.

38. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 342; quoted also by Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 11.

ter do not treat the tradition of the story of Jesus, but mainly present the gospel as a proclamation.

Thus Craig Evans's analysis of "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription," though our evidence is still fragmentary, adds additional support to Crossan's and Reed's approach. Evans's analysis was published, with extensive bibliography, even referring to the gospel research of Julius Schniewind, Gerhard Friedrich's teacher and predecessor, four years before Crossan's and Reed's book, although they do not cite it in their bibliography. It comes from a scholar with textual and archaeological expertise,<sup>39</sup> contributing thereby to a broad and growing consensus (bulleted for clarity):

Comparison of Mark's incipit [meaning opening words here, not added superscript title] with this part of the inscription [ἤρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι' αὐτὸν εὐαγγελίων ἡ γενέθλιος τοῦ θεοῦ] seems fully warranted.

- First, there is reference to good news, or "gospel." In Mark the word appears in the singular (εὐαγγέλιον), while in the inscription it appears in the more conventional plural (εὐαγγέλια).
- Second, there is reference to the *beginning* of this good news. In Mark the nominal form is employed (ἀρχή), while in the inscription the verbal form is employed (ἄρχειν).
- Third, this good news is brought about by a divine agent. In Mark this agent is "Jesus the Anointed," υἱὸς (either in the incipit, or as declared elsewhere in the Markan Gospel), while in the inscription the agent is "Augustus," the "savior" and "benefactor," θεός. In many other inscriptions and papyri Augustus is referred to as υἱὸς θεοῦ, or *divi filius*. . . .
- The use of the word "appearance" (ἐπιφανεῖν), moreover, only enhances the divine element.
- Mark appears deliberately to highlight parallels between Jesus' behavior and his treatment at the hands of the Romans, on the one hand, and Roman tradition and practices concerning the Ruler Cult, on the other.<sup>40</sup>

Evans offers detailed evidence of "intriguing parallels" on "1. *The 'Gospel'*"; "2. *Omens and Prophecies*"; "3. *The Roman Triumph*"; "4. *Hailed in Divine Terms*"; "5. *Healing*"; "6. *Seated or Standing at God's Right Hand*"; "7. *Libations in Honor of Caesar*"; "8. *The Emperor's 'Advent' and the Promise of a New World Order*"; and "9. *Post-Mortem Deification*."<sup>41</sup> He concludes:

[I]t seems clear that the evangelist has deliberately echoed an important theme of the Roman Imperial Cult. However, the appeal to Isa 40:3 ("A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord . . .") in Mark 1:3 also suggests that the "good news of Second Isaiah is also in view. Occurrences of "good news" or "gospel," which in Hebrew is *bsr*, are found in the second half

39. Evans, *Jesus and His World*.

40. Evans, "Mark's Incipit and Priene," 69.

41. Evans, "Mark's Incipit and Priene," 69–76.

of Isaiah. There are five passages in all (Isa 40:1–11; 41:21–29; 52:7–12; 60:1–7; 61:1–11). Three of them (Isa 40:1–11; 52:7; 61:1–2) were very important in the development of Jesus’ theology and that of the early church. . . .

The vision of Second Isaiah approximates the Roman Imperial cult’s promise of the new world order. Talk of “good news,” which envisions law and order, health and prosperity, and justice and mercy, would ring a familiar cord [sic] in the ears of both Jews and Gentiles. In mimicking the language of the Imperial cult and in quoting Isa 40:3 Mark appears to have welded together two disparate, potentially antagonistic theologies. On the one hand, he proclaims to the Jewish people the fulfillment of their fondest hopes—the good news of the prophet Isaiah, while on the other hand he has boldly announced to the Roman world that the good news for the world began not with Julius Caesar and his descendants, but with Jesus Christ, the true son of God.

From this I think we can infer that one very important aspect of the Markan evangelist’s portrait of Jesus is comparison to the Roman emperor and the emperor cult. . . . The good news of Isaiah, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, had now become the good news for the entire world. As the true son of God, Jesus offers the world genuine good news, which no Roman emperor could ever hope to offer or bring to pass. It is in this context that the Markan evangelist boldly set forth his apologetic. Despite rejection at the hands of his own people (and the most important people, as importance would have been measured at that time) and a shameful death at the hands of the most powerful people, Jesus was indeed the son of God, humanity’s true Savior and Lord. Mark’s purpose is to narrate the story of Jesus in such a way that such a confession will appear compelling and plausible to Jews and Romans alike.<sup>42</sup>

### Singular *εὐαγγέλιον* and Plural *εὐαγγέλια*

Evans does not seem bothered by the difference between the singular and plural forms of the “good news,” simply asserting that the plural form is “the more conventional plural.”<sup>43</sup> Stanton concurs on the dual Jewish and Roman background, but is inconclusive on the distinction, arguing that

early Christian addiction to the noun in the singular cannot readily be explained either as a development of Scriptural usage or as influenced by Jesus traditions, and even with the verb there is only limited continuity. Wholesale borrowing from the imperial cult is equally implausible, for, as we have seen, Christian use of the noun ‘gospel’ in the singular is almost without contemporary precedent.<sup>44</sup>

Stanton links the Christian usage to Gal 4:4–5, God sending forth his son as a “‘once for all’ disclosure of ‘the one glad tidings’.” He does “not think we can be certain about the *origin* of Christian use of the ‘gospel’ word group.”

But what is clear is that there were rival ‘gospels’. What would have been ringing in the ears of those to whom Paul first proclaimed God’s good news, and

42. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and Priene,” 76–80.

43. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and Priene,” 69.

44. But see Deissmann’s early-third-century CE example of the singular, 70 above.

those who listened to his letters read aloud? Not the 'non-religious' usage of the noun in the Greek Bible (and perhaps not even the rich theological use of the verb in Deutero-Isaiah and related passages), but the 'religious' usage of the word group in the imperial cult which pervaded the cities in which Christianity first flourished. As always, Gospel and culture are intertwined, and often somewhat at odds with one another.

'Gospel' may have been adapted from its usage in the plural in the imperial cult. Or it may have been adapted from its secular use, in which it meant simply 'good news' without any religious connotations. But either way it was modified radically, partly in the light of the Biblical usage of the verb, and more particularly on the basis of early Christian convictions concerning God's salvific act through the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Crossan offers a fuller interpretation, but without taking up the issue of pluralism in the earliest expression of gospel forms:

My first point concerns that word "good news" for Caesar and for Christ. In English we say that the "news is good or bad," so although the noun is plural, it is always used as singular in construction. In Greek both the singular and plural forms, *euaggelion* and *euaggelia*, are used. How best to retain that distinction in English? Maybe, by distinguishing between "Good News" or the "Gospel" (uppercase and singular) and "good news" or "gospels" (lowercase and plural)? Why is that distinction—so clear in the Greek original, but now lost in our English translations—so important?

We talk easily of "the four gospels" or of "the gospels of the New Testament," as if that were not a problem. But the earliest followers of Jesus thought that there was only one single Gospel. Paul said so emphatically and rather sharply to the Galatians: "I am astonished that you are . . . turning to a different Gospel—not that there is another Gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. . . . (1:6-9)

Apart from the simple, unqualified, and emphatic term, "the Gospel," Paul mentions "the Gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1), "the Gospel of his Son" (Rom. 1:9), "the Gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27), and climactically, "the Gospel [of] the glory of Christ who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). But it is always and ever, in the singular. It is "the Gospel," as if to say, there is only one Good News for the whole world. And it is not "the gospels of Caesar," but "the Gospel" of Christ. . . .

. . . "Good News" or "the Gospel" [Mark 1:14-15] is the Greek singular case (*euaggelion*). . . .[T]he kingdom of God is already present. . . . [T]hat advent itself is *the Gospel*, *the Good News*—in the singular (*euaggelion*)—once and for all forever. It is opposed to the gospels, the good news—in the plural (*euaggelia*)—of the advent of a new emperor. It is even or especially opposed to that inscription from Priene that announced the cosmic good news (*euaggelia*) of Augustus's

45. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 34-35. The contrast between the Markan and imperial gospels does not necessarily support a Rome origin for the Gospel of Mark, as Winn attempts to prove (*Purpose of Mark's Gospel*). For a survey of possible origins, see J. Dewey, "Galilean Provenance?"

birth as renewed creation, as re-starting the world all over again in peace and order.<sup>46</sup>

Crossan's interpretation of Paul seems basically accurate as far as the Paul is concerned whom we have come to know in mainstream Christian tradition. Crossan's assessment is one way to structure the larger question of the contrast between the overarching motif of the kingdom of God in Pauline/Markan views of the gospel vis-à-vis the gospels of the Roman Empire. But it does not detail various gospel nuances among Jesus' earliest and early followers, nor encompass the extent of the problem of other gospels Paul faced *within* early "Christian" (if you will) circles, especially as espoused by those who opposed him, not only in Galatia (Gal 1:8–9), but also in Corinth—the "super-apostles" (2 Cor 11:4–5; 12:11) against whom he must justify his status as an apostle of Jesus the anointed.<sup>47</sup> How far back one can track the second-century Jewish-Christian reference in Syria to Paul himself as a "deceiver" with a "false gospel" who did not profess the "true gospel" awaits more widespread scholarly distillation.<sup>48</sup> A "polemical rivalry"<sup>49</sup> is in any case behind Paul's strong assertions in Galatians, so much so that he anathematizes his opponents and wishes they would castrate themselves (Gal 5:12). Could not then the singular "gospel" in both Paul and Mark be in part an intramural demarcation vis-à-vis other "Christian" and "pre-Christian" gospels? It *needs* to be singular to contrast with those gospels too.

**Q 7:22: the "good news" for "the poor" and "the decisive transformation of human life"**

Asking questions about the earliest form(s) of the gospel and whether one should describe it as singular or plural has led to a more basic discovery: finding the good news of Jesus as the keynote for the Sayings Gospel Q by means of the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζω ("bring or announce good news") in Q 7:22 (= Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22) and as the culmination of the normative Q section, chapters 3–7.<sup>50</sup> The verb is thus embedded in the earliest information we have about Jesus and is firmly rooted in the prophetic tradition of Israel, the book of Isaiah. We should not be surprised to find such good news in the Sayings Gospel Q, along with the Gospel of Mark the two major sources of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As a gospel of Jesus' sayings, it has many differences with the Gospel

46. Crossan, *Power of Parable*, 159–61.

47. See Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 79–103.

48. *Circuits of Peter* in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 2.17.4. See Jones, "Jewish Christianity of the Pseudo-Clementines," 318–19 in *Second-Century 'Heretics'*; also his *Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity and Pseudoclementina*; as well as Bremmer, *Pseudo-Clementines*, and the articles (by others) on the Ebionites, Nazarenes, and Elchasaites in *Second-Century 'Heretics'*. For possible linkage of Ebionites, Nazarenes, and "Judaizers" (Gal 2: 12, 14) to the Sayings Gospel Q and early Jesus traditions, see Robinson, *Jesus of Q*, 10.

49. Meggitt, "New Testament and Roman Emperor," in Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 35 n. 71.

50. Joseph, "Q 3–7."

of Mark, but one feature in common, connection with Isaiah, so much so that a recent commentary titles the start of its Markan text, "Beginning of the Gospel 'according to Isaiah': Mark 1:1–3."<sup>51</sup>

As for Q 7:22, it borrows and develops a number of scriptural passages from Isaiah, to the benefit of "the blind" (Isa 61:1; 35:5), "the lame" (Isa 35:5–6), "lepers" (Isa 35:5), "the dead" (Isa 26:19), and "the poor" (Isa 61:1), who are "good-news-ed" (εὐαγγελίζονται).<sup>52</sup>

The blind regain their sight and the lame walk around, the skin-diseased are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised, and the poor are evangelized.<sup>53</sup>

The passage also has striking similarities to the use of Isa 61:1 in 4Q521 from the Qumran community, which is dated c. 150–100 BCE, has an explicit reference like Sayings Gospel Q 7:22 to the resurrection of the dead, and has been conjectured to have a literary relationship to the use of Isa 61:1 in Q 7:22.<sup>54</sup>

The study of Q in the last two generations has changed our understanding of the gospel and broadened our perspective relative to both the traditions of Israel and the larger context of the Roman Empire, as well as the violent empires of today. And the gospel of Jesus remains. As John Kloppenborg put it:

It is now common to call Q "the Sayings Gospel Q" or "The Synoptic Sayings Gospel." This is not because we know the title of Q. In ancient documents titles were normally found either at the beginning or end of the document. If Q had a title, it was no doubt eliminated when it was incorporated by Matthew and Luke. It is in fact very unlikely that Q called itself a "gospel" (*euaggelion*), for the simple reason that in the first century, this term was not yet the designation of a literary genre. Rather, an *euaggelion* was a message of the decisive transformation of human life. This is the very term that was used in an inscription from the Asian city of Priene, dated 9 BCE, describing the message of a golden age that the emperor Augustus was believed to have inaugurated. By this standard, Q, with its announcement of the advent of the reign of God, is every bit as much a gospel as the canonical Gospels and the message that Paul describes as his *euaggelion*. Moreover, Q refers to Jesus' proclamation to the poor with the verbal form *euaggelizesthai*, "to proclaim good news" (Q 7:22). So to refer to Q as the Sayings Gospel Q is to claim that it, no less than the more familiar Gospels of the New Testament, represents a message of definitive transformation of human affairs, effected by God, and connected with the person of Jesus.

. . . [W]e now know that there were multiple "gospels" among the Jesus movements: not only Paul's gospel, and the gospel messages preserved in the

51. Focant, *Gospel according to Mark*, v.

52. Joseph, *Jesus, Q, and DSS*, 165–66.

53. Robinson, *Gospel of Jesus*, 33 (trans.). For commentary, see 10, 19, 121–22, 126–27, 135, 148–49, 169–70, 194, 237. Or, for translation of the last expression, "the poor are given good news," see Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel*, 129.

54. Joseph, *Jesus, Q, and DSS*, 168–86.

Synoptic Gospels and John, but other documents that explicitly called themselves “gospels”: the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Truth*, and so on. So when we call Q a “gospel,” it is to make the point that Q deserves to be considered as a decisive proclamation of a new state of affairs for humans, not simply relegated to the status of a “source” of Matthew and Luke.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Smoking Gun: Melito of Sardis (writing 165–175 CE; died c. 180 CE)**

At the start of research, it seemed clear that the contrast Crossan and others had been making between Christianity and Greco-Roman culture in the first century was legitimate, but the evidence was primarily circumstantial. Not that “circumstantial” is necessarily inappropriate. Rather, such evidence is based on inference, which is what historians and scholars are involved with as a matter of course. But what would enhance contemporary inference? What could be the smoking gun that, beyond the circumstantial, would provide evidence of contrast or clash between Roman empire and Christian faith? That the savior Augustus and the savior Jesus are really a vivid comparison in the minds of people closer to their time? Is there an ancient pagan, Jewish, or Christian author who, embedded in the Roman situation, clearly realizes the contrast and sees the emperor cult as a “gospel” too, suggesting that the association in its ancient setting is more than a construction of modern scholarship? The answer is yes, Melito, bishop of Sardis. But first some background.

We have clear New Testament evidence of the attitude of many early Christians toward the imperial government, without an extensive mythological framework. Rom 13:1–7 may be a later insertion to this letter of Paul (e.g., 13:1: “Every person should voluntarily submit to those who have the authority to govern. For there is no legitimate authority except that authorized by God, and those authorities that exist have been established by God”).<sup>56</sup> But it seems to fit the time and tone of 1 Pet 2:13–17, which urges Christians in Asia Minor—“the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet 1:1 NRSV)—to follow the alleged submissiveness of “Christ” in his suffering (1 Pet 2:18–25), rise above an alien world, and non-violently submit. 1 Peter may have been written in the last decade of the first century,<sup>57</sup> channeling the historical Peter, when the Roman emperors were Domitian (81–96 CE), Nerva (96–96), and Trajan (98–117). Suetonius (69–122 CE) says Domitian was so arrogant that he issued a circular letter by way of his aides commanding, “‘Our Lord (*dominus*) and our God (*deus*) bids that this be done.’ And so the custom arose of henceforth addressing him in no other way even in writing or in conversation.”<sup>58</sup>

55. Kloppenborg, *Q the Earliest Gospel*, 60–61.

56. Dewey et al., *Authentic Paul (SV)*, 253.

57. Boring, “First Peter,” 2126.

58. Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 8.13.2.

But the following words show little if any overt concern about an imperial gospel. They seem to reflect the political powerlessness of people who attempt to rise above their cultural surroundings, thinking they are in the mode of God's chosen Israel as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . . aliens and exiles" (1 Pet 2:9, 11)." "Resident aliens" is how these people considered themselves, "not at home in society," possessing "a social standing below citizens but above strangers, freed slaves, and slaves . . . alienated from, but living among, residents of the Roman Empire. . . . Their behavior must be blameless, as it reflects on the community as a whole":<sup>59</sup>

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, (14) or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. (15) For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. (16) As servants (δοῦλοι) of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. (17) Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pet 2:13–17 NRSV)

We need to read between the lines here. True, as Boring says, these are "churches struggling in difficult social situations."<sup>60</sup> But why are these Christians advised to be above reproach so as not to draw undue attention to themselves? 1 Peter, as does the book of Revelation (which includes Sardis among its addressees [3:1–6]), fits the situation of Christians facing regional persecution. In the first and second centuries there was considerable Jewish/Christian overlap. The "border lines" were not precise.<sup>61</sup> Even the "Christians" 1 Peter addresses were probably a combination of Jews and Gentiles.<sup>62</sup> The general situation is described well by Keresztes:

When the worship of the Emperor became, especially in the East, a symbol of loyalty to Rome, the Jews from Augustus on had daily sacrifices in honour of, or for, the ruling Emperor. In the use of the official epithets for the Emperor, it seems that the Jews by a curious discrimination tried to avoid the recognition of the 'divine character' of the Emperor. While they never seemed to use the title *theos* and only with repugnance the word *despotēs*, they did freely use the Latin word *divus* and *dominus* or even [Gk] *kyrios*. Thus in the oath of loyalty to the Emperor, the Jews were allowed to use expurgated formulas. The Jewish attitude toward public games in honour of the emperor and in connection with the Imperial cult was also quite flexible.

59. Setzer, "First Peter," 439.

60. Boring, "First Peter," 2126.

61. Boyarin, *Border Lines*.

62. "Unlike Paul (see, e.g., Romans 9–10), the author of 1 Peter does not discuss the problem posed by an unbelieving Israel. Rather, adopting Old Testament language to describe the new community grounded in God's redeeming act in Christ, the author makes clear that God's new chosen people is to be a unity comprising all people, Gentiles as well as Jews" (Balch and Achtemeier, "First Peter," 2060).

The very active proselytizing efforts of the Jews caused much of the friction between the Imperial power of Rome and Judaism. For this was not simply a religion with eyes on the world to come but also it had much political content, which, if retained, would have secured the conquest of the world by the Jewish race. The aim of Jewish proselytism was to 'israelize' the world, not only by imposing on its converts Jewish customs and social practices but also by calling upon them to 'denationalize' themselves and become part of the Jewish nation. It is easy to see that Jewish proselytism would have undermined the whole Roman system. . . .

On the [one] hand Rome respected its own traditional principle that every nation had the right and duty to observe the religion established by its ancestors, but on the other hand it applied its other principle that Rome had the right to rule the world and to subordinate to its institutions the religions of the subject nation. Thus Rome adopted the gods of all other national religions. This solution being impossible with the Jewish religion, Rome recognized the right of the Jews to live according to their ancient customs and as a special privilege granted them exemption from all functions which were in opposition to or interfered with their religious laws. This special status of the Jews was an attempt at a compromise between Rome's two conflicting religious policies.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, including Christian Jews or Jewish Christians or whatever hybrids there were in the melting pot of Asia Minor, Christians of various persuasions were not opposed because they worshiped Jesus as God, as if threatening the Roman belief that the emperor was god. "The problem was not whom the Christians worshiped, but whom they refused to worship: the Roman gods."<sup>64</sup> And of these gods there were many. A Mediterranean cruise lecturer in 2011 even facetiously said, "The Romans never met a god they didn't like!"<sup>65</sup> Helmut Koester issues a caveat not to take too seriously much of the hype from the Romans for their gods and the nature of the emperor as a god. He argues that

[t]he cult of the emperor was part of the official Roman state religion, it never became a new religion as such, or a substitute for religion. . . . No one was urged to accept the emperor cult as a replacement for a traditional religion. On the contrary, the Romans supported the veneration of all gods in their native cities and nations, and they expected that these gods would in turn lend their support to the Roman state. When inscriptions speak about the emperor as "savior" (*sōtēr*) and announce his "appearance" (*epiphaneia*) as a "gospel" (*euangelion*) praising him as the benefactor and bringer of peace to all humankind, the religious content of these terms did not question the legitimacy of other religions. In official usage, such terminology soon became hackneyed language.<sup>66</sup>

63. Keresztes, "Jews, Christians, and Domitian," 12.

64. Ehrman, *Jesus to Constantine*, 56.

65. Martin Blinder, M.D., forensic psychiatrist and historian, "The Rise & Fall of the Roman Empire," October 8, 2011.

66. Koester, *Hellenistic Age*, 355.

True, ancient Roman historians often seem to describe their "divine" emperors with tongue in cheek. After Augustus, for whom could one even make a case to qualify as a god? But even if the emperor cult arguably "never became a new religion," it was not for lack of trying by the government, which went far in presenting itself, for many, as a "substitute for religion." Through sacrifices and votive offerings and state favors the Roman government displayed a pervasive system of all these gods, including the emperor cult, as being a united and harmonious whole. It projected itself as overseer and guarantor of the system of the gods, guardian and agent of its own cosmos. As Koester even admits, "the Romans expected that these gods would in turn lend their support to the Roman state."<sup>67</sup> And, as Keresztes says, Rome "applied its other principle that [it] had the right to rule the world and to subordinate to its [Rome's] institutions the religions of the subject nation. Thus Rome adopted the gods of all other national religions."<sup>68</sup> It is this pervasive aspect of the Roman system that Crossan and Reed mean when they speak of "an entire world of meaning" and "not the isolated peculiarity of emperor worship, but the integrated universality of imperial theology."<sup>69</sup>

Melito, in addressing the Roman government via the person of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE; ruled 161–180), refers to "new decrees (καινοῖς δόγμασι)"<sup>70</sup> and a "new ordinance"<sup>71</sup> whose severity is unprecedented, even compared to the last decade of the first century. This Melito was a prolific writer,<sup>72</sup> serving the Sardis Quartodeciman (Fourteenth-er) church that customarily celebrated Easter on the Jewish Passover date of 14 Nisan, perhaps only two generations after the book of Revelation (he was a chiliast, understandably). He has been denigrated for alleged anti-Judaism in his homily *On the Pascha*, but the accusation has been refuted.<sup>73</sup> The homily is also known for striking typological Old Testament imagery and a graphic description of the crucifixion of a naked Jesus, the only such known in all of early Christian literature (no medieval loincloth):

O frightful murder! O unheard of injustice! The Lord is disfigured and he is not deemed worthy of a cloak for his naked body (γυμνῶ τῷ σώματι), so that he might not be exposed. For this reason the stars turned and fled, and the day grew quite dark, in order to hide the naked [person] (γεγυμνωμένον) hanging on the tree, darkening not the body of the Lord, but the eyes of [humans].<sup>74</sup>

In writing his celebrated apology to the emperor, Melito tried to soften the contrast between the gospel of Caesar and the gospel of Christ for the sake of

67. Koester, *Hellenistic Age*, 355.

68. Keresztes, "Jews, Christians, and Domitian," 12.

69. Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 188; see 73–74 above.

70. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.5.

71. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.6.

72. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.1–2.

73. Hanneken, "Melito's *Peri Pascha*."

74. Melito, *On the Pascha* 97 (trans. *Kerux*, altered).

the well-being of his people and their relief from persecution. The date has been associated with either of two persecutions in 161–168 CE or around 177 CE, the latter of which seems preferable.<sup>75</sup> The Romans would call for general sacrifices, when faced with war and pestilence, to propitiate the gods and raise money, and the Christians were sadly affected. The emperor wrote his Stoic *Meditations* in the period 170–180 while mostly at war with the Germans. Melito appealed to him:

(4.26.5) For—a thing that never happened before—the race of the pious is persecuted, harassed by new decrees (καινοῖς δόγμασι) throughout Asia. For shameless informers and lovers of others' goods, taking advantage of the decrees, openly plunder us, night and day robbing innocent persons. (6) And if this is done by your order, let it be done properly. For a just king should never deliberate unjustly. We, indeed, gladly accept the honour of such a death; but we must ask only this favour of you—that you yourself, first taking note of the workers of such contention, justly judge whether they are worthy of death and punishment or safety and security, But if this decision, and this new ordinance, which is not proper even against hostile barbarians, are not from you, all the more we beg you not to [abandon] us in such a public persecution.

(7) For our philosophy at first flourished among barbarians, but after appearing among your peoples during the powerful rule of your ancestor Augustus it became a blessing especially to your empire. For at that time the might of the Romans increased to something great and splendid; you, hoped for by men, have become its successor, and will continue, along with your son, if you *protect the philosophy which was cradled and took its beginning with Augustus, and which your ancestors honoured along with the other [religions]*. [8] *This is the greatest proof that our teaching flourished for the good along with the empire as it happily started out: from the time of Augustus nothing evil has befallen it, but on the contrary everything has been splendid and praiseworthy in accordance with the prayers of all.* (9) Alone of all, persuaded by certain malignant persons, Nero and Domitian wanted to bring our teaching into ill repute; and since their time by an unreasonable custom false information about such people has become common.

(10) But your godly fathers corrected their ignorance, many times rebuking in writing those many persons who had dared to make disturbances about them. Among these was your grandfather Hadrian, who wrote to the proconsul Fundanus, governor of Asia, and many others; and your father, when you were ruling the world with him, wrote to the cities—among others to the Larissians and the Thessalonians and the Athenians and all the Greeks—not to make disturbances concerning us. (11) But since you have the same opinion on these matters as they did, and a much greater love of mankind and of wisdom, we are the more persuaded that you will do everything we ask.<sup>76</sup>

75. Keresztes, "Marcus Aurelius," 340.

76. Melito, *Apology*, in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.5–11; trans. Grant, *Second-Century Christianity*, 69–71; italics added.

Melito “tried to link together the imperial and Christian cults,”<sup>77</sup> showing that they are both for the good of life in the empire. He speaks approvingly of the “philosophy which was cradled and took its beginning with Augustus, and which your ancestors honoured along with the other cults” (4.26.7). He goes on to assert that “[t]his is the greatest proof that our teaching flourished for the good along with the empire as it happily started out.” Christianity and the emperor cult can co-exist. Christian “teaching flourished for the good along with the empire as it happily started out: from the time of Augustus nothing evil has befallen it . . . in accordance with the prayers of all.” Melito commends syncretistic prayer, suggesting that the empire’s welfare has been enhanced by “the prayers of all,” in which he wants the emperor to believe that Christians have a positive part, and thus are to be treated well. All this is in accord with the philosophy of Augustus in which the emperor cult is anchored. Melito is struggling for Christian legitimacy in a hostile world. “According to this bishop the world has had two saviours, who appeared together, Augustus and Christ.”<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

Thus we have traced a mini-trajectory on the meaning of “gospel” from Rudolf Bultmann to Dominic Crossan. In Part 1 we saw that Bultmann did not agree that the meaning of “gospel” was influenced by Roman culture, particularly the emperor cult. He tended to see “gospel” as an abstraction or absolute, grounded in the Pauline proclamation. In Part 2, under the influence of Adolf Deissmann, we saw how New Testament language is not in isolation from its original culture, but is influenced by that language more than we initially like to admit. The Priene inscription in Asia Minor became our focal point for understanding the matrix in contrast to which the “gospel” took its linguistic meaning.

In Part 3, since early Christian tradition is fragmentary, we looked at ways to reduce that fragmentation. We inquired about “the earliest form of the gospel” and compared the beginning of the Gospel of Mark to the Priene inscription. The result was parallels between “the gospel of Jesus Christ” and “the gospel of Caesar Augustus” so significant that a linguistic correlation seems obvious. Also, a comparison of the “singular and plural” forms of “gospel” suggests a lack of distinctiveness at the level of ordinary usage. The focus of any gospel emanating from Jesus and/or his earliest followers we came to understand as in the best prophetic tradition of Israel, calling one and all to transformation of life. Finally we examined a second-century situation, our “smoking gun,” involving specific contrast between an emperor (Marcus Aurelius) and a Christian

77. Friedrich, *εὐαγγέλιον*, 725 n. 41.

78. Harnack, “Als die Zeit erfüllet war,” 305; see Friedrich, *εὐαγγέλιον*, 725 n. 41.

leader (Melito of Sardis), showing that the tension between “the gospel of Caesar Augustus as Lord” and “the gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord” was a real acknowledged conscious tension even back then. This adds validity to Dominic Crossan’s contemporary perception of the reality out of which the Christian religion has arisen.

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