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Jesus and the Language of the Gospel

Introduction

Over 250 years of critical study of the canonical gospels have shown that they are not the natural habitat of the sayings of Jesus.[1] These literary contexts of the sayings in the gospels are, around a generation or more, later than the actual lived social context of Jesus himself. The sayings are later included in the gospels by their authors to address issues of concern to later Hellenistic Christian gatherings, while Jesus himself during his lifetime addressed the concerns of an earlier Palestinian audience, principally in Galilee, or so the gospels state. In effect, his sayings have been commandeered to serve the gospel preached by the later church. The gospel narratives may appear to be "biographical," but they neither describe the actual course of his life nor his public career.[2]

In a seminal study of the New Testament as literature, Amos Wilder surveyed rhetorical forms used in early Christianity and titled his book *The Language of the Gospel*.[3] Wilder argues that continuity exists between language used by Jesus and the language used by the church.

> The preceding chapters have dealt with the form and modes of the early Christian utterance. In every case and throughout we have seen how inseparable these were from the substance of the Gospel. *How* Jesus and his followers spoke and wrote could not be separated from what they communicated. It was the novelty of grace and the fundamental renewal of existence

1. Hedrick, *When History and Faith Collide*, 110–25.

2. Hedrick, "What Is a Gospel?"; Hedrick, "Role of 'Summary Statements.'"

3. Wilder, *Language of the Gospel;* the book was reissued in 1999 under a new title, which simply made his original subtitle (i.e., *Early Christian Rhetoric*) the primary title.

> which brought forth a new fruit of the lips, new tongues and new rhetorical patterns.[4]

> The language-phenomenon which broke into the world with the discourse of Jesus and which continued in the Church arose out of a depth of impulse which imposed plastic expression throughout. We cannot without qualification use such terms as 'poetic' or 'imaginative', since these terms today suggest aesthetic or romantic categories. The early Christian vision and grasp of existence, however, had a dynamic character, suggested by the formulas 'mythic mentality' and 'mythical ideation', a level of apprehension which the New Testament speaks of as that of the Spirit.[5]

Despite clear differences in content between the two, Wilder asserts that the "gospel" preached by Jesus and the gospel preached by the church at the level of language have both a formal and modal continuity—i.e., a basic underlying unity lies, at the level of language, between Jesus and the church.

> We have been looking at the chief literary genres of the New Testament, gospel, epistle, etc., and we may well pause here to ask what we learn here about our main topic, early Christian rhetoric. They [i.e., the chief literary genres] represent, indeed, a later phase, that of writing. Yet in that mode they carry on essential features of the earliest Christian utterance: its creative novelty in styles; its dramatic immediacy and dialogue feature; its use of common idiom and media; its addiction to narrative; its subordination of the personal role or talent to the Spirit in the community, especially in anonymity or pseudonymity.[6]

This chapter challenges Wilder's thesis that language continuity exists between Jesus and the later church. The break between Jesus and the later church is formal, modal and conceptual.[7] This chapter focuses on the

4. Wilder, *Language of the Gospel*, 126.

5. Ibid., 126–27.

6. Ibid., 42–43; compare his statements on pp. 17 and 20.

7. The break between Jesus and the church is particularly evident between the parables of Jesus and the church's interpretations of the parables. See the discussion between myself and Wilder on the issue of continuity between the parables and the church. Wilder noted: "in the light of his thorough documentation of the ways in which the tradition construed these parables Hedrick can plausibly conclude that the church had soon forgotten or misconstrued their original situation and purport": Wilder, *Bible and Literary Critic*, 126. Wilder, on the other hand, argued that the parables' "original force and bearing continued in a kind of underground way in the memory of the community" (128). See my response to his critique in *Many Things in Parables*, 87–88.

language of the "gospel" as proclaimed by the church in the first century. Later I will take up the nature of Jesus' own idiom, as it is suggested by those sayings that most probably originated with him. It has long been recognized that the idiom of Jesus and the idiom of the church are radically different. That is to say: what Jesus talked about and what the church proclaimed are quite different things. The purpose of this section is to lay bare the principal concerns of the church as they are reflected in the writings of those Christians who wrote the New Testament. Here are two statements by Günther Bornkamm describing the ugly gap that exists between what Jesus of Nazareth had to say and what the church said about him:

> Paul's theology is not a repetition of Jesus' preaching of the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus Christ himself and the salvation based on and made available through his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his exaltation as Lord form the subject of Paul's proclamation. This means a complete shift [in message] came about [between Jesus and Paul] which the modern mind finds hard to understand and often deplores.[8]

> It is true that between the preaching of the historical Jesus and the gospel not only of Paul but of the post-Easter church in general there is a fundamental difference: only the unthinking can miss it.[9]

The Eclipse of the Jesus Sayings Traditions

To judge from the literature that later became the New Testament, authority shifted rather rapidly from the remembered sayings of Jesus the historical man to inspiration from the resurrected Lord, who continued to speak new sayings to the church through early Christian prophets.[10] For example, Matt 28:16–20 dramatizes a scene illustrating this phase of the early church experience.[11] In Matthew's narrative the figure who speaks these words is not the pre-crucifixion man Jesus, but the speaker portrayed is the post-crucifixion resurrected Lord. The words that Jesus is made to speak in Matthew's narrative were not created in the mind of Jesus and made into audible sound by his vocal cords, but, as portrayed, they are created in the mind

8. Bornkamm, *Paul*, 109.
9. Ibid, 110.
10. Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus*; it was republished as *Continuing Voice of Jesus*.
11. Boring, *Continuing Voice of Jesus*, 247–49.

of a figure of Matthew's faith in the mind of Matthew. Hence, they are not portrayed as something said by a human being but as something spoken by a heavenly figure. There are no parallels; the only record of them that exists is due to Matthew's stylus and papyrus. They derive as the mental creation of the writer we call Matthew, who places them on the lips of Christ as words inspired by the resurrected Christ—or so early Christians believed.[12] These words are separated from the time of Jesus by over 50 years, or so.[13]

Another text portraying the circumstance of the early Christian prophet through whom the resurrected Christ speaks is Rev 1:1–20. The prophet claims to hear the words of the resurrected Christ while "in the spirit"; hence the words are formed in his mind during an ecstatic trance in which he claims to hear and see the resurrected Christ. The mystical character of the process becomes clear in Rev 1:10:

> I John . . . was on the island called Patmos . . . I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying "write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches . . ."

In Rev 1:12–16 John describes the figure he "saw" speaking to him; in 1:17–20 he describes further instructions from this figure. And in Rev 2:1–3:22 John repeats the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor portrayed as spoken to him by the figure described in 1:12–16. Early Christians must have assumed some such ecstatic experiences on the part of those whom they regarded as prophets of the resurrected Christ (compare Paul's experience in 2 Cor 12:7–9, for example).

By the middle first century, however, authority had clearly passed from the resurrected Lord (whose words were mediated through Christian prophets) to enterprising teachers, who proclaimed a "gospel," which set out their own understanding of the faith. These teachers cited both Scripture (Old Testament) and the Lord as the authority for their own ideas.[14] The canonical gospels, written in the latter half of the first century, in general, do not cite the words of Jesus as sources of authority for the continuing life of the church. Rather, they cite sayings by him as being uttered in debates and dialogues with Israelites who represented the Judean state religion. His sayings and stories were part of their description of his public career, which

12. This rationale is true whether or not Matthew be construed as an early Christian prophet. The words are portrayed as an invention of the gospel writer Matthew, unless he used at this point a traditional saying and fictionally claimed the authority of the resurrected Lord as the source.

13. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 233–316.

14. For example, see Matthew's reading (Matt 1:18–23) of Isa 7:10–17.

the evangelists were composing out of the odd bits of tradition they had collected orally and in some cases in writing. Our earliest extant gospel, Mark, in large part looks back to the first third of the century from the latter half of the century in order to establish that the gospel preached by the church in the latter half of the first century had a "historical" basis in an earlier public career of Jesus—his life, sayings, death, and resurrection.[15]

Citations of Jesus' sayings (or even sayings of the resurrected Lord) are virtually non-existent in the canonical post-apostolic literature, and are relatively rare in Paul's letters, where, because of Paul's early date, we might expect to find a greater number.[16] Three explicit references by Paul to sayings or traditions about Jesus have parallels in the synoptic gospels attributed to the historical man Jesus of Nazareth:[17] 1 Cor 7:10–11 (=Mark 10:11–12); 9:14 (=Luke 10:7); 11:23–26 (=Mark 14:22–25); and two sayings that do not have parallels in the synoptic gospels: 1 Cor 14:37 (no known parallel in the extant sayings tradition); 1 Thess 4:15–17 (no known parallel in the extant sayings tradition). And there is one statement by Paul admitting ignorance of a Jesus saying covering a certain situation in the continuing life of the later church (1 Cor 7:25), which seems to suggest that Paul was at least aware of a number of Jesus traditions—perhaps even a collection.

Some statements of Paul have been claimed to "echo" sayings of Jesus known from the gospels, but these sayings appear in Paul's letters without any acknowledgement that the ideas derive from Jesus (or the Lord): Rom 12:14 (=Luke 6:28); Rom 12:17 and 1 Thess 5:15 (=Luke 6:29); Rom 13:7 (=Mark 12:17, parallels); Rom 14:13 (=Mark 9:42); Rom 14:14 (=Mark 7:15, parallels); 1 Thess 5:2 (=Luke 12:39–40); and 1 Thess 5:13 (=Mark 9:50).[18] A few statements have also been cited as echoes of Jesus sayings in James, and 1 Peter.[19] Some scholars find a larger number of such echoes or allusions, but all would agree on the few I have cited above.

The issue of what is and what is not an "echo" of a Jesus saying is controversial with maximalists and minimalists disagreeing. From my perspective

15. See Hedrick, "Parable and Kingdom," 179–82. The motives for writing undoubtedly change with the later gospel writers. Luke, for example, in the prologue states the reasons for writing (Luke 1:1–4); nevertheless, Luke's statement is not inconsistent with what I have claimed for Mark.

16. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 52, 63; Allison, "Pauline Epistles and Synoptic Gospels," 1–32.

17. That is to say these sayings are known from the gospels and originate either with the historical man or an early Christian prophet.

18. See the discussion and the sources in Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 49–75; Allison, "Pauline Epistles and Synoptic Gospels."

19. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 64–66, 71–75.

one can certainly argue, even on the basis of the scanty evidence, that the Jesus sayings tradition has indeed influenced the discourse of the church at points here and there. But even granting the larger number of echoes and allusions, however vague, fails to dispel the impression that already before the first half of the first century authority had shifted irrevocably from the personal authority of Jesus the historical man whose words were recalled as guidance for life. Authority had become vested in the resurrected Christ as mediated through prophets and enterprising teachers. Consider the surprising statement of Paul, which appears to suggest at the very least that the authority of the resurrected Lord carried more weight than the historical man:

> From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh; even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. (2 Cor 5:16)[20]

Nevertheless, fragments of what Jesus the historical man had said (as opposed to sayings attributed to him by early Christian prophets) remained in memory and circulated in early Christian gatherings. In the end, however, the remembered sayings of the historical man competed rather unsuccessfully with the rise of other sources of authority in the church: the authority of Scripture, new sayings of Jesus mediated through early Christian prophets (2 Cor 12:7–9), and the personal authority of enterprising Christian teachers—like Paul, for example.

The authority of the sayings of Jesus/the Lord made a greater impact on certain non-canonical texts. *The Gospel of Thomas*, dating around the end of the first century, is comprised of a collection of sayings of Jesus. The sayings are simply listed seriatim without explanation, or narrative framework to suggest an explanation.[21] Another text drawing on a sayings tradition is the *Apocryphon* (i.e., Secret Writing) *of James.* It describes the apostles as remembering the sayings of Jesus and writing them down (*Sec. Jas.* 2:7–16). The text has been dated from early second century to the early third century,[22] and includes a number of parables and kingdom sayings of the Lord.[23] The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (i.e., the *Didache*) is a kind of manual of instruction for the church. What makes it interesting in this context is that it has numerous parallels with the Jesus sayings tradition

20. See the comments by Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 429–30.
21. See Hedrick, *Unlocking the Secrets*.
22. Williams, "Apocryphon of James," 26–27.
23. See Hedrick, "Kingdom Sayings and Parables"; Cameron, *Apocryphon of James.*

known from the gospels. It has been dated as first or second century.[24] The *Dialogue of the Savior* is a highly fragmentary collection of dialogues between the disciples and the resurrected Lord having parallels to sayings in the canonical gospels and other parts of the canonical texts. The text has been dated in the early decades of the second century and the source it used "in the last decades of the first century CE and certainly not later than the Gospel of John."[25] A last text mentioned here is the recently discovered *Gospel of the Savior*. The text, consisting of dialogues between the resurrected Lord and his disciples/apostles, features sayings of Jesus that have parallels in the canonical tradition as well as sayings that do not overlap the canonical tradition. It has been dated as late second century.[26]

Reinventing Jesus

In the canonical gospels Jesus is presented as a man of Galilee of the Roman Province of Palestine to whom were attributed mighty works, wonders, and signs (Acts 2:22); he lived and died in Palestine in the early years of the first century. From the sketchy historical details, it appears that Jesus responded to John's preaching of repentance (Mark 1:9) and was baptized by John at the Jordan River (Mark 1:9–10). Jesus is portrayed as a recognized follower of John but who became a competitor of John after John's arrest (Mark 1:14–15), or perhaps before (John 3:22–26); in either case Jesus began his own independent public career out of John's shadow (Mark 1:14–15). In the hypothetical Sayings Source Q Jesus is quoted as saying that the sovereign rule of God was so close on the horizon that its presence was being experienced already in the exorcisms he performed (Luke 11:20 = Matt 12:28). From my perspective, Jesus can be described broadly as an itinerant pundit for God's sovereign rule.[27] Although he is portrayed as accompanied by a small group of associates his career was essentially a solo act.[28] He formed no communities, although Matthew in the latter half of the first century

24. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers*, 305–33; Jefford, Harder, and Amezaga, *Apostolic Fathers*, 32–51.

25. Emmel, *Dialogue of the Savior*, 15–16.

26. Hedrick and Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior*, 23.

27. This statement should not be understood as suggesting that the message of the sovereign rule of God dominated his discourse; see Hedrick, "Parables and Kingdom."

28. The word "associate" is a general term used to accommodate the Twelve and others in the group around Jesus: acquaintances (Luke 23:49), friends (Luke 12:4 = Matt 11:10; Luke 7:34; John 11:11), comrades (Matt 26:50), the women (Luke 8:1–3) and others of the company (Luke 24:22), and others around Jesus along with the Twelve (Mark 4:10).

credited him with establishing a community (Matt 16:18)—at least that was the belief of the Matthean community.[29]

From what his earliest followers left us, it appears that Jesus was a parsimonious speaker—that is to say: he wasn't given to long-winded speeches, although this may have been due to the fact that he was not a writer but a *speaker* who left no written records of his discourse, and the residue of his spoken word depended ultimately on the uncertainties of human memory. His discourse apparently took three forms—at least these vestiges of discourse have been claimed as the remains of the tradition after a critical sifting: brief sayings (short quips), brief summaries, and secular stories. The synoptic gospels describe the sovereign rule of God as the principal focus of his interest[30]—he apparently thought its realization was near enough to be experienced in his day (Luke 17:20–21).

The gospel writers describe him as running afoul of the religious authorities (priests of the Jerusalem temple and the Pharisees), as criticizing the temple cult (Mark 11:12–19), those who were traditionally pious (Matt 23:1–7, Luke 11:43), and political leaders (Mark 8:15). He was criticized for discounting the traditions of the elders (Mark 2:27; 7:15; Matt 5:21–48) and for his open lifestyle (Matt 11:18–19). If this information is correct, it is scarcely surprising that his life ended tragically (Mark 14–15). All this information comes from the synoptic gospels—texts written in the third quarter of the first century after the church had become a self-conscious organism. The writing of the gospels was part of the church's pursuit of its own roots—an attempt to understand where and how it all had begun.[31]

At the end of the first century, a generation after the writing of the synoptic gospels, Jesus is seen very differently, and his portrayal in the Gospel of John makes a remarkable contrast to the synoptic gospels. John's story is nothing less than a clear revision of the sayings tradition and the public career of Jesus, as it was known from the synoptic gospels and Q.[32] All four canonical gospels were capable Greek writers and heirs of Greek and Roman culture who were at home in the Gentile phase of the Christian movement.[33]

29. The language of Matthew at various points reflects an ordered community; see the brief statement by Meier, "Matthew," 639.

30. This expression translates the Greek word βασιλεία, usually translated simply as "kingdom."

31. Hedrick, "Parable and Kingdom," 179–82.

32. See Hedrick, *When History and Faith Collide*, 31–47, for a brief contrast of the portraits of Jesus in the canonical gospels.

33. Achtemeier, "Mark," 542–43; Meier, "Matthew, Gospel of," 625–27; Johnson, "Luke–Acts" 404–5; Conway, "John," 361–62.

Jesus' small group of associates whom I will call the "Jesus people" scattered after his death and at this point even secondary sources dry up. We really know very little about the 15 years that separate Jesus' death from Paul's first letter (First Thessalonians). When the thread of the story picks up again, it is mid-first century. In the Pauline correspondence and the rest of the New Testament Jesus is now touted as a resurrected Lord, a divine man with a heavenly origin, by a Roman citizen, Saul of Tarsus. This Saul, or Paul as he called himself, was a writer of letters to "gatherings of saints," who were brought into these gatherings by Paul's personal influence (except for the gathering at Rome, Rom 1:8–15) in the name of the crucified and resurrected Son of God.

The subsequent literature of what became Christianity, originating in the mid-part of the first century and going forward, comes from churches that must be characterized as Graeco-Roman—not Judean. The Judean-Semitic part of the story ended shortly after the death of Jesus—at least, as far as the sources are concerned.

The shift from Jesus and his wandering band of Jesus people to Paul and his gatherings of saints was more than cosmetic. The shift reflects nothing less than a virtual transformation of what Jesus had to say to Israelites at the early part of the century. Jesus was portrayed as "countrified" and the heir of Israelite culture and religion. He wandered through the narrow lanes of Galilean villages touting the sovereign rule of God, debating Torah and the traditional teachings of the Judean elders with a religious sect, the Pharisees. Paul, on the other hand, travelled on good Roman roads from major city to major city in the Roman Empire establishing gatherings of those he called "saints" (i.e., those set apart, separated, or the holy ones). Those who read his letters are described as some of the most sophisticated citizens of the Roman Empire (1 Cor 1:26; Rom 16:23; Phil 4:22).

The Formal Difference in Language

I have already mentioned the change in the form of the message: the early records show that all that is left of Jesus' oral discourse are brief sayings, perhaps short summaries, and stories.[34] On the other hand, Paul and others wrote long letters, epistles, and theological essays. Much later church leaders eventually affirmed written creeds and confessions, which were subscribed by the clergy. They eventually evolved a new set of holy books (New Testament) equal in authority to the Israelite Scriptures, which they used along

34. These literary forms are all that are left of Jesus' discourse according to the red and pink sayings in Funk and Hoover, *Five Gospels*.

with other holy books (the Apocrypha). Eventually, their new collection of new Covenant books determined how the churches would understand the Israelite Bible, the Scripture that Jesus knew.[35] Whereas Jesus was formally unschooled, later church leaders were schooled in the traditions of Greco-Roman culture.

The Subject Matter of Their Language

The lived social and linguistic contexts between Jesus and the church's later gatherings of saints were quite different, and the difference, as one might suppose, produced changes. There are many differences between Jesus and the church, but my goal here is to describe only the remarkable differences in language and concept that was brought about by the shift from Jesus' situation to that of the early church.

Shift 1: The Loss of "Kingdom" Language

The shift in language from Jesus to the early church most noticeably resulted in the virtual loss of language about the near arrival or presence of the sovereign rule of God, which Jesus had apparently associated with his own day. The gospel writer Mark summarized Jesus' message about the sovereign rule of God in this way:

> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying, "the time is fulfilled, and the sovereign rule of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:14–15)

What is meant by the sovereign rule "being at hand" is this: it "has drawn near" in time—not really here yet, but actually impinging on the present moment![36]

However, Jesus is also reported to have said:

> The sovereign rule is not coming with signs to be observed; they will not say, "Lo, here it is!" or "Over there!" for behold the sovereign rule of God is in your midst. (Luke 17:20–21)

35. Early Christian writers in effect disregarded the simple or literal understanding of the Israelite Scriptures and read the text from the perspective of Christian faith; see Grant, *Interpretation of the Bible*, 28–42.

36. See the survey of the issue by Perrin, *The Kingdom of God*, 64–78.

One might well translate "in your midst" as "within you." These two statements do not exactly agree, but one thing is clear: that the sovereign rule of God is either here or about to be here in the next moment or so.[37] A Q text even describes the sovereign rule of God as present in the exorcisms of Jesus:

> If it is by the finger [Matt reads "spirit"] of God that I cast out demons, then has the sovereign rule of God come upon you. (Luke 11:20 = Matt 12:28)

The synoptic gospels report that the sovereign rule of God dominated the discourse of Jesus. In John's later gospel, however, the sovereign rule of God has virtually disappeared—except for a few allusions (John 3:3, 5; 18:36), and none of these allusions in John reflect the immediacy of the appearing of the sovereign rule as is reflected in the synoptic gospels. Outside the gospels in the rest of the New Testament this kind of immanent, emergent, or present "kingdom" language virtually disappears as the historical clock ticks past Jesus to the time of his later followers. When "kingdom" language does surface again in the early church, God's sovereign rule has become an ideal hope for the follower of Jesus in the distant, indefinite future. In ecclesiastical belief the sovereign rule is not something coming upon the world, but something that the believer moves toward, which the unbeliever will never experience. For example:

- The unrighteous will not inherit the sovereign rule of God. (1 Cor 6:9)
- Flesh and blood cannot inherit the sovereign rule of God. (1 Cor 15:50)
- Lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own sovereign rule and glory. (1 Thess 2:12)
- I charge you . . . by his appearing and his sovereign rule: preach the word. (2 Tim 4:1)
- The Lord will . . . save me for his heavenly sovereign rule. (2 Tim 4:18)
- Confirm your call and election so that there will be . . . an entrance into the eternal sovereign rule of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:10–11)

37. See the survey of the issue by Dodd, *Parables*, 21–35.

Shift 2: The Messenger Becomes the Message

The early church's message to the world was strikingly different from what Jesus had said. Whereas Jesus proclaimed the sovereign rule of God, the church proclaimed Jesus—specifically the church proclaims salvation through his crucifixion and resurrection. And this proclamation became known as the gospel—"the good news." Calling it "good news" obscured the fact the language of the gospel is steeped in religious institutionalism: the church's gospel is direct, unambiguous, authoritarian, confessional, propositional, and intolerant. The short of the matter is that Jesus did not proclaim the "good news" of his own crucifixion and resurrection, rather according to Mark he proclaimed the "good news of God," which included the announcement of the nearness of the sovereign rule of God (Mark 1:14–15).[38]

In the early church, however, the "gospel" was different. Here are Paul's brief summaries of the "gospel":

- If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:9)
- Now I would remind you, brothers, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas and to the twelve . . . (1 Cor 15:1–5)
- There is not another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel about Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be damned. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, damn him. (Gal 1:7–9)

Actually Paul's crucifixion/resurrection gospel was not shared by all early Christians in the first and second centuries. Other ways of making sense of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus appear both within the canonical texts and elsewhere in the broader stream of early Christian literature. Texts that do not tie crucifixion and resurrection to human sins were

38. The evidence for associating the theme of the sovereign rule of God with the proclamation of Jesus is particularly mixed when it comes to the parables of Jesus; see Hedrick, "Parable and Kingdom," 179–99.

not included in the literature that was eventually canonized by the churches sharing Paul's gospel. Hence most readers are unfamiliar with them.

For example, at one point in First Peter the suffering of Jesus is not understood as a sacrificial substitution, as Paul would have it: that Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3), i.e., in our behalf (Rom 5:6–9)—so that we might not have to die. Rather 1 Pet 2:18–24 offers another subtly different explanation for the crucifixion offered to Christian slaves: Christ suffered as an example for you so that you could live righteously—his death exemplifies how believers are to walk righteously, as he walked: "He committed no sin neither was deceit found in his mouth" (1 Pet 2:22; Isa 53:9). True, the author claims that "he bore our sins" but it was for the purpose "that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet 2:24). In other words in this passage Jesus' death both exemplifies how the righteous should bear unjust suffering, and enables the believer to do it.

Here is another view of the resurrection in a text that did not make it into the canon of Christian Scripture. In the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, the resurrection of Jesus is understood spiritually.

> The savior gave us the way of our immortality by transforming himself into an imperishable Aeon [an eternal divine figure]. As the Apostle said: "we suffered with him, and we arose with him, and went to heaven with him," and at the end of our lives "we are drawn to heaven by him, like beams [being emitted] by the sun, not being restrained by anything. This is the spiritual resurrection which swallows up the psychic [life/soul] in the same way as the fleshly." (*Treatise on the Resurrection* 45:14—46:1)[39]

These two observations (the loss of kingdom language and the messenger becoming the message) about the difference between the situation of Jesus and the situation of the church have been recognized among New Testament scholars since 1778 when Gotthold Lessing, published a fragment of a work by Hermann Samuel Reimarus entitled "On the Intentions of Jesus and his Disciples." Reimarus did not allow his "Wolfenbüttel Fragments," as they were called, to be published until after his death in 1768. When Lessing completed the publication of Reimarus' work, he was forced to surrender the manuscript to the civil authorities; he was informed that his future work on religion was subject to censorship, and that he must cease publishing such fragments and similar works.[40]

39. Peel, "Treatise on the Resurrection," 123–46.

40. Talbert and Fraser, *Reimarus: Fragments*, 21–22.

Ambiguity and Aphorism versus Mythical and Mystical Language

The language of Jesus, as we will see, traded in ambiguity, aphorism, metaphor, hyperbole, etc.; the language of the church, on the other hand, was no-nonsense language; it was language without equivocation. The language of the church (ecclesiastical language) aimed at authoritatively controlling the ethical behavior of people by appealing to divine sanctions. Ecclesiastical language is characterized by a self-interest in the organic survival of the church, and it proscribed any ideas or behavior that threatened the organism. On the other hand, the church also traded in mythical and mystical language. Ecclesiastical idiom is very different from the vestiges of Jesus' idiom as it has survived in the gospels.

Mythical Language

What I mean by "myth" is this: stories about the gods, or greater than human figures that occur in a time and place different from common human experience.[41] In the synoptic gospels the reader encounters a man depicted bigger-than-life in a social setting that bears some resemblance to common space and time—with notable exceptions like demons, evil spirits, manipulations of nature, etc. In the synoptic gospels Jesus is described as a Graeco-Roman demigod or immortal, at least the confession of the centurion at the crucifixion suggests that is how he understood him (Mark 15:39).[42] Immortals at the end of their careers are honored in the same way as the gods, and some even become gods.[43] This exalted status accorded Jesus becomes even more pronounced in the Gospel of John and the later ecclesiastical creeds.[44]

41. For the definition, see Hedrick, "Realism in Western Narrative," 351–52.

42 Jesus is described by the centurion in Mark as "a son of God" (Mark 15:39). For a brief discussion of the demigods see in particular Talbert, *What is a Gospel*, 25–52. Scholars disagree on what was being confessed by the centurion. Scholars around the turn of the previous century understood the centurion's comment as an acknowledgement that Jesus had died a noble death; scholars near the end of the twentieth century tend to make his comment a Christian confession. See the brief note in Hedrick, "Miracles in Mark," 306 n24.

43. At the end of their careers some demigods did become gods. Not that they were conceptually admitted to the traditional twelve gods of the Greek pantheon (or thirteen with Dionysos), but at least three achieved the status of god: Castor and Pollux (the Dioscuri), Asklepius, and Herakles: see Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 15.

44. See John 20:28 and the creeds: Bettensen and Maunder, *Documents*, 25–29.

Here are three such passages in Christian texts using mythical language to describe Jesus:

- In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father . . . No one has ever seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father has made him known. (John 1:1–4, 14, 18)
- He was in the form of God but did not count the equality with God a thing to be held on to, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth . . . (Phil 2:6–10)
- He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . (Col 1:15–17)

Mystical Language

Mystical language is related to "mysticism," a religious experience in which all barriers between the Divine Presence and human beings are broken down and a merging of the finite with the Infinite occurs, the human with the Divine.[45] In short, an individual becomes one with the deity so that the individual person is indistinguishable from the deity. Language suggesting a type of "Christ mysticism" is found throughout early Christian writings, although both Christ and the individual appear to remain clearly defined independent entities. Such "mystical" language found in the New Testament does not appear to be mysticism in a narrow technical sense, however. Nevertheless, early Christian writers clearly used mystical language reflecting a close union between believers and the Christ.

Here are some of those passages that make use of mystical language:

- I do not pray only for these [you have given me] but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even

45. See the discussion in Harkness, *Mysticism*, 15–24; and Ringgen, "Mysticism."

as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one . . . (John 17:20–23)

- I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. (Gal 2:20)
- The Spirit of God dwells in you . . . (Rom 8:9)
- My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you. (Gal 4:19)
- Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you? (2 Cor 13:5)
- But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. (Rom 8:10)
- [May God grant] that Christ dwells in your hearts through faith. (Eph 3:16–17)
- Anyone in Christ is a new creation. (2 Cor 5:17)
- All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death. (Rom 6:3)
- In Christ Jesus you are all one. (Gal 3:28)
- God . . . made us alive . . . and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:4–6)

Mystery Language

The term "mystery" is generally used positively to describe the incomprehensible working of divine power, which the early followers of Jesus struggled to understand rationally. Five issues perplexed them and a few of these still remain rational problems to the modern Christian mind.

The mystery of the failure of the Israelite mission

I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and so all Israel will be saved. (Rom 11:25–26)

The mystery of the spiritual body

What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable . . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body . . . Lo I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed. (1 Cor 15:42–52)

The mystery of God's will to unite all things in Christ:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things to him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:9–10)

The mystery of lawlessness already at work

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and coming. (2 Thess 2:7–9)

God's mystery of Christ

. . . God's mystery of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col 2:1–3)

Mystery as a puzzle to be deciphered

To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not

> understand . . . (Mark 4:11–12; cf. the use in Rev 1:20; 17:5, 7; and 10:7, a divine mystery)

My only point in tracing this mythical, mystical, and mystery language in New Testament texts is to illustrate the kind of language the church uses to express its faith, and to point out that it is not a form of speech employed by the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth. The existential merits and appropriateness of this kind of language for the twenty-first century is another matter entirely.

The Rise of Christian Institutionalism[46]

Paul saw the church as a gathering of saints that existed at the end of time (1 Cor 10:11; 1 Cor 7:29–31)—that is, between the crucifixion/resurrection of Christ and Christ's near return (1 Thess 4:13–17). For Paul the old age of the world was ending and a new age was in process of beginning (1 Cor 15:20–24). Nevertheless the existence of even a temporary period between the old age and the beginning of the new meant that Paul's eschatological gatherings of saints were, for that period at least, also a historical phenomenon, and as part of this world, provision needed to be made for their religious life. Temporarily finding itself between these two events, the eschatological community eventually evolved into a historical institution by its development of clergy, ritual, confessions, and eventually creeds. This process was neither uniform nor consistent, but varied from gathering to gathering, and depended on the local situation.

Here are a few selected passages reflecting the language of the church as it addressed this theological shift and made appropriate changes in community life; the developments reflect a tacit acknowledgment of the community's new status as a developing institution.

Initially its leaders were chosen by God through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:4–11):

> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. (1 Cor 12:28–29)

Later its leaders were chosen by the church on the basis of community-established moral and ethical standards (1 Tim 3:1–13):[47]

46. See the brief survey by Bultmann, *Theology*, 95–118.

47. See the discussion by Schweizer, "Ministry in the Early Church."

> A bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money . . . (1 Tim 3:2–3)

There were two prominent rituals that evolved in the early church:[48]

- Baptism was a rite that marked participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus as well as initiation into the community of faith.

> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3–4)

- The Lord's Supper/Eucharist was a rite of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus and later became a rite that insured immortality[49]

> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:23–25)

Hymns, confessions, and poetry were a part of early Christian worship:[50]

48. See the discussion by Harrington, "Church," 656–66; Newman, *Church History*, 131–40.

49. Ignatius, *Eph.* 20:2; Schoedel, *Ignatius*, 97–99.

50. The dividing line between hymns, confessions, and poetry is virtually nonexistent. Scholars tend to use "hymn" to describe certain occurrences of rhythmic language appearing in the New Testament literature. The early church was a singing church, a trait they shared with their Israelite roots and the "pagan" environment (1 Cor 14:15, 26; Col 3:16; Jas 5:13). In some cases hymns have been preserved in the literature: Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 3:18–22; Heb 1:1–4; John 1:1–14. See Fuller, *Christology*, 203–42; Schoedel, *Ignatius*, 204–27; and the following surveys of hymns: Shepherd, "Hymns," 667–68; Bichsel, "Hymns," 350–51.

> The saying is sure: If we died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him; if we are faithless, he remains faithful. (2 Tim 2:11–13)

> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)

There is, of course, more of this kind of language but such a thought-world, sentiments, and contents are foreign to the language of Jesus. This kind of language reflects the distinctive interests of the early Christian communities as to the basis of their faith (crucifixion/resurrection) and church order: baptism, communion, church hierarchy, rituals, instructions in "Christian" living, i.e., the kind of living that pleases God—the instructions relate to social life in the world: marriage (1 Cor 7:8–16), sexual practice (1 Cor 6:12–20), religious faith and diet (1 Cor 8:1–13; 1 Cor 10:23–31), and the relationships between the sexes (1 Cor 7:1–7).

Household Codes of the Roman Empire[51]

For the duties and responsibilities that covered private affairs in families of the Christian community the church did not turn to the radical ethics of Jesus, if it even knew them, but the church drew "household codes" out of the values of personal life in the early Roman Empire. Here is one of the earliest:

> Wives be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Slaves obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eye service as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (Col 3:18—4:1)

Some of the other household codes used in New Testament texts are: Eph 5:21–6:9; 1 Pet 2:11–3:12; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–10; 3:1.

51. Balch, "Household Codes"; Fitzgerald, "Haustafeln."

While Jesus is represented in the gospels as routinely challenging the traditional values of Israelite religion,[52] the church, on the other hand, eventually assimilates aspects of the culture and values of the Hellenistic world in these household codes. The ethic of Jesus is radical in the extreme, but the household codes ensure that members of the Christian communities do not give cause for criticism by the community at large. As Paul suggested, the church community should aim to be good citizens of the Roman Empire (Rom 13:1–7), and one of his disciples noted that Christians should conduct themselves wisely toward outsiders (Col 4:5).

The Creeds of the Church of the Third and Fourth Centuries

The church concluded its shift from the radical pundit for the sovereign rule of God by virtually eliminating the career and words of Jesus from its creeds. The Apostles Creed, for example, skips from Jesus' birth to his death—thus eliminating his sayings and parables and in effect leaping over the life of the man who had announced the immediacy of God's sovereign rule.[53] The only thing that was important about his life is that he was born and died. What was really important about Jesus is what the church thought and said about him:

> I believe in God almighty and in Christ Jesus, his only son, our Lord who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary <. . .> who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried and the third day rose from the dead, who ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of the Father whence he comes to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting.[54]

The pointed brackets indicate where the public career of Jesus would have fallen including his sayings and the mighty deeds attributed to him. The historical man, Jesus of Nazareth, is a presupposition for the faith of the church, which is not actually based on Jesus, but rather on what Jesus later became in the faith of the church: the resurrected and exalted Lord.

52. See, for example, the antitheses Matt 5:21–48. My point here is that the gospel writers saw Jesus as being in serious conflict with his own tradition. See the brief discussion in Suggs, "Antitheses," 93–107; and the discussion in Manson, S*ayings of Jesus*, 155–64.

53. Bettenson and Mauder, *Documents*, 25–29.

54. The Apostles Creed is dated fourth century; ibid., 25–26.