

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: THE “FIFTH GOSPEL” OR A WRITING THAT EXCLUDES ITSELF FROM THE CANON?

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SUMMARY: I. *What is a Gospel?* II. *How many Gospels?* III. *Characteristics of the Gospels.* IV. *Does the ‘GTh’ qualify as a Gospel?* V. *Conclusion.*

In his Ecclesiastical History (6.12.3–6), Eusebius of Caesarea¹ includes a brief excerpt from the now lost work entitled “On the So-Called Gospel according to Peter” written by Serapion, bishop of Antioch at the end of the 2nd Century CE. From this excerpt, we learn that the bishop first came across this gospel during a visit he had made to his faithful dwelling in the city of Rhosus. It appears as though the writing had caused some dispute among the faithful, for which reason they decided to bring the matter up before their bishop. At the time, Serapion allowed them to continue using the writing assuming that, since it bore the name of the prince of the Apostles, it would not pose any dangers. However, later on, upon reading it himself, he realized that it contained various docetic elements and thus wrote to the church forbidding them to use it.

Certain parallels can be observed between this episode and the story of the *Gospel of Thomas (GTh)* in the 20th Century. Indeed, just as the Gospel of Peter was a cause of disputes at Rhosus, so the *GTh* has been in biblical scholarship, so much so that no other early Christian text has received as much attention as it has for the last century.² However, unlike in the case of the Gospel according to Peter, there is no Serapion to decide once and for all for readers whether or not the Gospel of Thomas should be accorded any importance at all. Accordingly, since the discovery of fragments of the Greek text of the *GTh* at Oxyrhynchus (in 1897 and 1903), and especially of a complete Coptic version in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, scholars have for over fifty years debated and tried to reach a consensus

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¹ Cfr. EUSEBIUS PAMPHILI, *Ecclesiastical History: Books 6–10*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 1955^{repr. 2005}, 23–24.

² Cfr. N. PERRIN, *Recent Trends in Gospel of Thomas Research (1991–2006): Part I, The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels*, «Currents in Biblical Research» 5 (2007/2) 183; J.H. WOOD, *The New Testament Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas: A New Direction*, «New Testament Studies» 51 (2005/4) 580.

on various issues tied to the text: its dating, provenance, language of origin, the community behind its creation, its theology. Most importantly, however, is the debate concerning the text's relationship with the 4 canonical Gospels and whether it should be used in the research on the historical Jesus, a debate which oftentimes boils down to whether the *GTh* is as much a Gospel as the other 4 canonical Gospels.³ This may appear to be a question concerning the genre of the canonical gospels and of the *GTh*. Yet, despite the fact that the genres oftentimes proposed for the latter are usually not the same ones proposed for the former,⁴ the term "Gospel" is nevertheless still applied to both. What is it then that qualifies a document as a "Gospel"?

I. WHAT IS A GOSPEL?

The English word 'Gospel' stands for the Greek term εὐαγγέλιον, a term whose usage and content in primitive Christianity has been a subject of debate among scholars for a long time.⁵ The term in itself means 'good news' and does not seem to have been initially used in reference to any written work. Indeed, none of the four canonical Gospels refers to itself as a 'Gospel'. That according to Matthew calls itself 'a book', as seen in the beginning phrase "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ" (βιβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). The same applies

³ For a summary of scholarship on the *GTh*, cfr. PERRIN, *Recent Trends in Gospel of Thomas Research (1991–2006). Part I*; N. PERRIN, C.W. SKINNER, *Recent Trends in Gospel of Thomas Research (1989–2011). Part II: Genre, Theology and Relationship to the Gospel of John*, «Currents in Biblical Research» 11 (2012/1); M. LABAHN, *The Non-Synoptic Jesus: An Introduction to John, Paul, Thomas, and Other Outsiders of the Jesus Quest*, in T. HOLMÉN, S.E. PORTER (eds.), *Handbook for the study of the historical Jesus*, 3, Brill, Leiden; Boston 2011, 1976–1983; S.J. PATTERSON, *The Gospel of Thomas and the Historical Jesus*, in A. F. GREGORY, C. M. TUCKETT, T. NICKLAS, J. VERHEYDEN (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York 2015, 233–249.

⁴ Cfr. PERRIN, SKINNER, *Recent Trends in Gospel of Thomas Research (1989–2011). Part II*, 66–70. Gathercole, however, does consider the possibility of *GTh* falling under the category of "Gospel". Yet it appears that in order to do so, he has to have recourse to a definition by Gregory and Tuckett which starts from the idea that any document that bears the name "Gospel" should be considered in the definition of the category, whether or not it was accepted as such by early Christians. Cfr. S.J. GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary*, Brill, Leiden; Boston 2014, 139–141.

⁵ See the following studies and their bibliographies: M. HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, J. BOWDEN (trans.), SCM Press, London 2000; G. STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge - New York, NY 2004; P. POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels: History, Theology, and Impact of the Biblical Term Euangelion*, De Gruyter, Berlin; Boston 2013; B. ESTRADA, *Así nacieron los Evangelios*, BAC, Madrid 2017.

for the writing according to John, which, at its conclusion, briefly mentions that Jesus did many other things that were not written “in this book” (ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦτο). The one according to Luke can be referred to as a ‘narrative’ (διήγησις), given that this technical term is used in the writing’s literary prologue. Finally, that according to Mark does not refer to itself in any of the aforementioned ways, though it may have played an important role in the term εὐαγγέλιον being used for a written work, since its opening phrase is “the beginning of the Gospel of/about Jesus Christ” (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). We also do not find in the other writings of the New Testament (NT) the term εὐαγγέλιον used in reference to a written book. Rather, it seems to have been used initially in reference to an oral proclamation, for which the verbal form εὐαγγελίζεσθαι (‘to proclaim the good news’ or “to gospel”⁶) was also used. Accordingly, this would mean that later on, when the term began to be used in reference to a written work, it was because this oral proclamation could be recognized in the latter. Thus, it follows that identifying the content of this oral proclamation is a necessary step to distinguishing between what can be called a gospel and what cannot.

Unfortunately, the term εὐαγγέλιον admits different meanings, and that not only in the NT, since it is not a Christian invention. The word is used a few times in the LXX as a translation of the Hebrew word *הַבְּשָׁרָה*, though always in the plural form (εὐαγγέλια), where it means ‘good news’ (usually concerning a victory in a battle) or the ‘reward’ given for proclaiming it. The verbal form εὐαγγελίζεσθαι is also found in the LXX as a translation of the Hebrew verb *בִּשְׂרָה*. In this form, however, a theological nuance is usually present as well. A good example of this is the passage Isa 61:1–2, which Luke reports Jesus as applying to Himself at the beginning of His ministry (Luke 4:16–21). This Old Testament (OT) backdrop may account for the use of the verb in the NT but not for the use of the more frequent⁷ nominal form. Indeed, at the beginning of the Christian era, the term εὐαγγέλιον was often used in political propaganda and even as part of the imperial cult to refer to the good tidings and benefits deriving from the emperor as the savior and benefactor of the world. However, save for a few exceptions, the word is always in the plural form: εὐαγγέλια. Scholars therefore hold that the first Christians borrowed the term from this secular environment and, despite this, they would use it rather in the singular form in order to emphasize a message that they held very dearly: there is only *one* true Gospel and it is the one they preach.⁸

Early Christian use of the term as found in the Pauline epistles shows that it consisted of a certain message, which, despite being expressed in different

⁶ STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 9.

⁷ Cfr. ESTRADA, *Así nacieron los Evangelios*, 4–5; POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 41–45.

⁸ See the ample discussion in STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 22–35.

formulas, nevertheless contained a common denominator: the resurrection of Jesus.⁹ This was indeed the good news that the apostles preached to the world and which rivaled any other ‘good news’ preached by others. However, those writings of the NT which would later be called ‘Gospels’ apparently give a slightly different meaning and/or content to the word *εὐαγγέλιον*. Take for instance the Gospel according to Mark. It is widely held among scholars that Mark’s narrative about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was the first of its kind to be written, about the year 70 CE, at a time when the meaning of the word as we find it in the Pauline epistles was already consolidated among the Christians. In Mark’s narrative, we find Jesus using the word *εὐαγγέλιον* to refer to the message He would preach.¹⁰ Stanton, however, argues that it is highly unlikely that Jesus Himself would have used the nominal form *εὐαγγέλιον* in reference to His preaching, given the fact that the term is uncommon in the OT scriptures, which formed the spiritual background of a first century Jew.¹¹ It is rather more probable that He would have used the verbal form in His preaching, which He would also have considered to be *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* “to gospel”, since, as we have pointed out, this form is oftentimes used in the OT to refer to the proclamation of the saving acts of God. Be that as it may, it would still be a mistake to assume that the content of Jesus’ preaching was different from that of the Apostles after Him. The Isaianic texts which contain the term *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* and which we see Jesus use in his preaching, were also considered to be Messianic texts. Therefore, when Jesus would refer to his actions as the fulfillment of these texts, “he was making an indirect messianic claim” so much so that “He was not merely a prophet proclaiming God’s good news; he was himself part of the good news.”¹² Moreover, the fact that the evangelist Mark uses the post-Easter term *εὐαγγέλιον* for Jesus’ own preaching tells us that for him, “the gospel preached by the church is identical with the gospel preached by Jesus.”¹³

Mark thus amplifies the term *εὐαγγέλιον* so that it includes not only the core message concerning Jesus resurrection, but also the story of His passion, which

⁹ Cfr. POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 11–13, 45–48.

¹⁰ See Mark 1:14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9. We may also include Mark 16:15 among the references but this verse belongs to the second ending of Mark, which is commonly thought to have been added after the other Gospels had already been written, cfr. R.T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2002, 685–688.

¹¹ Cfr. STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 18–19.

¹² *Ibidem*, 17. See also J.A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 1, Doubleday, Garden City 1981², 153–162.

¹³ M.D. HOOKER, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, A & C Black, London 1991, 34. Cited in STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 20. Pokorný explains this point further when he states that “the Easter Gospel is at the same time the theological point of view from which the story [the Gospel of Mark] is narrated” and that “the earthly story of Jesus has as its end and fulfillment in the Easter Gospel”. POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 124.

appears to have existed in narrative form from very early on in the history of Christianity, in addition to more details on His life and teachings.¹⁴ In our opinion, Ashton's definition of the term 'Gospel' very well reflects the evolution of the term as we have described it thus far, for he says that "a gospel is a narrative of the public career of Jesus, his passion and death, told in order to affirm or confirm the faith of Christian believers in the Risen Lord."¹⁵

II. HOW MANY GOSPELS?

Although Mark did not call his finished work an εὐαγγέλιον he nevertheless created a precedent that would soon be followed by others, a new literary genre¹⁶ that would soon be taken up by other writers. Matthew's version for instance, while it "follows the scheme of the 'history of salvation'", still uses Mark's narrative as a skeleton to which many sayings of Jesus have been added.¹⁷ Luke wished to compose his work as a historical narrative (διήγησις, cf. Luke 1:1), but he still maintained the Markan structure, to which he also added material. He does not use the word εὐαγγέλιον, though it is clear from his two volume work that the Easter Gospel interpreted Jesus' earthly mission and its continuation in the life of the Church.¹⁸ John also shies away from using not only the term εὐαγγέλιον but

¹⁴ Cfr. R.E. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, Doubleday, New York 1994, 46–57; HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 93–96; STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 53; POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 112–116. While speaking about Mark's narrative about Jesus, Hengel affirms that "the εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ of the dawn of the rule of God preached by Jesus on his public appearance (1.15), which is a thematic summary of the beginnings of his message, extends throughout Jesus' words and actions, passion and resurrection to become the comprehensive εὐαγγέλιον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ at the beginning (1.1)", HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 95. Similarly, in his study on the death of Jesus, one of the reasons Brown gives for following the opinion of most scholars concerning Markan priority in the formation of the Synoptic Gospels is that "this Gospel embodied a traditional or widely accepted pattern, i.e., that *Mark constituted a good summary of the main lines of the Jesus tradition familiar to major Christian communities from earlier preaching*" (italics are his). BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah*, 48.

¹⁵ J. ASHTON, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007², 332.

¹⁶ Cfr. POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 107–112. See also the discussions on the "gospel" genre in G. STANTON, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, 14–33; ASHTON, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 330–365.

¹⁷ Cfr. POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 169–173, here 171. In fact, basing his argument on Matthew's use of the noun εὐαγγέλιον (especially Matt 24:14; 26:13), Stanton even goes further to state that it was Matthew who first refers to his narrative on Jesus as a "gospel". Cfr. STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 56–58. Hengel seems to support this idea, but only as a possibility, cfr. HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 93.

¹⁸ Cfr. POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 164–166.

also the verb form *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι*. Nevertheless, his narrative follows a literary disposition similar to that in Mark and, although the work presents a different style with regards to the synoptics, Jesus' earthly story is still a principal part of it.¹⁹

Scholars agree that all these narratives about Jesus had already been written by the end of the first century CE. Yet, it is only about halfway through the second century CE that we find the term *εὐαγγέλιον* being used explicitly in reference to a written work. This was done by Justin Martyr,²⁰ who, when speaking of the Eucharist (1 *Apol.* 66.3), says “For the apostles, in the memoirs which they caused to be made and which are called gospels, handed down in this way what Jesus has commanded them”.²¹ Nevertheless, there are still many instances in previous writings—even in the first Apology itself—where the word *εὐαγγέλιον* “seems” to be used in reference to a writing.²² The uncertainty about this fact arises from the fact that oral proclamation of the Christ event and of Jesus traditions still continued within the Church, despite the fact that what for a long time had existed principally as an oral proclamation had now been put down in writing. Indeed, both forms of proclamation continued to co-exist for quite a while,²³ so much so that “in the first half of the second century it is not always easy to

¹⁹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 173–176; J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, A.J. WALKER (trans.), Doubleday, New York 2007, 229–235.

²⁰ Koester sustains that it was Marcion who first used the term *εὐαγγέλιον* in reference to a written work, in this case, a revised edition of the Jesus narrative composed by Luke, which he considered to be the only true Gospel. Justin would then supposedly take up the use of the term *εὐαγγέλιον* from him, but would apply it not only to one particular Gospel but to the other ‘memoirs of the apostles’. Cfr. H. KOESTER, *From the Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels*, «New Testament Studies» 35 (1989) 376, 378–380. Koester’s opinion has been refuted by scholars who sustain that “even before Marcion’s day, liturgical readings from the written gospels may well have been introduced as ‘the gospel’” and that it is highly unlikely that “the church should adopt from its fiercest opponent the titles, which are clearly attested for the Gospels from the middle of the second century”. Cfr. STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 54; HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, footnote 247.

²¹ οἱ γὰρ ἀπόστολοι ἐν τοῖς γενομένοις ὑπ’ αὐτῶν ἀπομνημονεύμασιν, ἃ καλεῖται εὐαγγέλια, οὕτως παρέδωκαν ἐντετάλται αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς. JUSTIN MARTYR, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, D. MINNS, P.M. PARVIS (trans.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, 256–258.

²² Cfr. STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 54–55. Surprisingly, even Koester is aware of the passages mentioned by Stanton, though for him they are not hard evidence of the use of *εὐαγγέλιον* for a writing; cfr. KOESTER, *From the Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels*, 370–373.

²³ Cfr. ESTRADA, *Así nacieron los Evangelios*, 141–145. Eusebius of Caesarea reports an interesting comment by Papias of Hierapolis (c. 110 CE) whereby he states that he would always ask about what the disciples of the Lord were saying since, he says, “I did not suppose that what came out of books would benefit me as much as that which came from a living and abiding voice” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3–4). B.D. EHRMAN (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, II, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2003, 98–99.

decide whether εὐαγγέλιον refers to oral proclamation or to a written account of the actions and teaching of Jesus".²⁴

In any case, it is also worth noting that Justin's reference to the writings as 'Gospels' is also the first Christian use known to us of the said term in its plural form, εὐαγγέλια. For a long time, despite the proliferation of many narratives about Jesus, the term εὐαγγέλιον continued to be used in the singular: there was only *one* gospel. Moreover, against the common practice in ancient times of preceding the title of a book with the author's name in the genitive case, (e.g., ΑΠΠΙΑΝΟΥ ΡΩΜΑΙΚΑ, "Appian's Roman Histories"), early manuscripts of what later became known as the canonical gospels bear the title εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ... ("Gospel according to...") almost as if to emphasize the fact that the evangelists are above all witnesses to the one gospel.²⁵ Thus, any writing that purposed itself to be recognized as an authoritative account of the proclaimed Gospel had to bear the title εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ...²⁶ In fact, many such writings did come up from the second century onwards. Nonetheless, from the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, i.e., from the scriptural citations they would claim to derive from or pertain to the εὐαγγέλιον, we gather that the Church recognized the one gospel only in some specific writings. Irenaeus of Lyon, writing in the last third of the second century, was the first to explicitly state that these writings were those by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He was so certain of this that he went on to demonstrate the convenience of the number of these versions of the *one* gospel being only *four* (*Haer.* 3.11.7–8).²⁷ Yet, despite the fact that it was he who coined the term "fourfold gospel", he did not invent the fact that there were only four Gospels. Rather, against the heretics of his day, he was obliged to make explicit what was implicitly known by everyone.²⁸

All this shows that it is not enough that a writing contain aspects—preferably in narrative form—of the public career of Jesus together with an account of his passion and death and that it be told in order to affirm or confirm the faith of Christian believers in the Risen Lord. Such a writing also has to be recognized by the church as having been written with apostolic authority. However, many of the 'gospels' that were rejected by the church did bear an apostle's name. What

²⁴ STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 79.

²⁵ This is also one of the reasons that Hengel gives to refute Koester's opinion regarding Marcion, Cfr. the reference in footnote 20 above.

²⁶ Cfr. HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 104; POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 191–193.

²⁷ Cfr. IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, R. M. GRANT (trans.), Routledge, London; New York 1997, 98–99.

²⁸ For more on this see the discussions in HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 15–20; STANTON, *Jesus and Gospel*, 75–81.

then would lead the Christians to be certain with regards to whether a writing contained the one ‘Gospel’?

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GOSPELS

We have already mentioned in passing some of the characteristics of a Gospel. With regard to content, it must contain aspects of the teachings, life and death of Jesus culminating in His resurrection, all presented in narrative form. From the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, we gather that this narrative must originate from the apostles. Papias of Hierapolis, for instance, shows that, in his time, the oral proclamation of the Gospel still exercised a great influence over the written account of Jesus. Yet he would accept no oral proclamation other than that embodied within the living Tradition of the Church as handed down by the apostles. He would take pleasure in hearing “only those who recalled the commandments which have been given faithfully by the Lord and which proceed from the truth itself” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3).²⁹

Justin Martyr was also convinced that the content in any gospel had to proceed from the apostles. On more than one occasion, he refers to them as “memoirs of the apostles” (ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων).³⁰ It is interesting to note that the term ordinarily used to refer to what had been received from the apostles is ‘tradition’ or ‘handing down’ (Greek: παραδιδόναι, Latin: *tradere*).³¹ In fact Justin Martyr also often uses the term to state that the Gospel content and the faith has been “handed down” from Jesus to the apostles and thence to them. Thus, in using the term ἀπομνημονεύματα for the Gospels, a term deriving from ἀπομνημονεύω, ‘to relate from memory’, he lets us in on another important aspect of the Gospels: it is something that is *remembered*.³² Koester shows how this

²⁹ EHRMAN (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, II, 98–99.

³⁰ Cfr. 1 *Apol* 33.5; 66.3; 67.3; *Dial.* 100.4; 101.3; 103.6, 8; 104.1; 105.1, 5, 6; 106.1, 3, 4; 107.1. In *Dial.* 103.8, Justin Martyr expands the phrase to include the apostles’ successors: Ἐν γὰρ τῶν Ἀπομνημονεύμασιν, ἃ φημι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖνοις παρακολουθησάντων (“for in the Memoirs, which were declared by the apostles and those who followed them”).

³¹ Cfr. 1 Cor 15:24.

³² Recent studies on the concept of memory and of its role in the formation of the Gospels give interesting insights. Unfortunately, discussing them here would lead us far away from the main purpose of this paper. See the following works for more on the topic: A. KIRK, T. THATCHER (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta 2005; A. KIRK, *Memory Theory and Jesus Research*, in T. HOLMÉN, S.E. PORTER (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 1, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2011, 809–842; R.K. MCIVER, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta 2011; R. BAUCKHAM, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2017², 319–357.

characteristic can be glimpsed from the attempts at recognition by the writers of the gnostic gospels of the second century. He states that,

Gnostic writers were composing their written documents on the basis of the claim that they remembered well from the apostles and from those who had followed them. For written documents containing the words and deeds of Jesus it was important (1) that they could claim to rest on legitimate memory, and (2) that they carried apostolic authority.³³

We find this conviction in Irenaeus of Lyon as well. As we have mentioned before, he is the one who first explicitly defends the fourfold gospel. He also extensively demonstrates that each of these gospels comes from the Apostles themselves and, if not directly from an Apostle, it is one of their collaborators who compiled it from their preaching (cfr. *Haer.* 3.1.1). In addition, he adds one important characteristic of the Gospel: it contains the *public teaching* of *all* the apostles.

For we have known the “economy” for our salvation only through those through whom the Gospel came to us; and what they then first preached they later, by God’s will, transmitted to us in the scriptures so that would be the foundation and pillar of our faith. [...] They went forth to the ends of the earth, proclaiming the news of the good gifts to us from God and announcing heavenly peace to men. Collectively and individually they had the Gospel of God (*Haer.* 3.1.1).³⁴

Further on in his treatise, Irenaeus stresses the fact that there were no secret transmissions by the apostles:

If however the apostles had known secret mysteries that they would have taught secretly to the “perfect,” unknown to the others, they would certainly have transmitted them especially to those to whom they entrusted the churches (*Haer.* 3.3.1).³⁵

Irenaeus formulates the statement in the form of a ‘remote condition’. One of the uses of such conditional clauses is to state what the hypothetical result of a situation expressed in an admittedly false protasis would be, should the latter turn out to be true. Thus, Irenaeus shows that it is most unlikely that the apostles knew any secret mysteries, hence the formulation “if the apostles *had known* secret mysteries” (*si recondita mysteria scissent apostoli*). However, he states that if, contrary to all expectations, they did have knowledge of some secret mysteries,

³³ KOESTER, *From the Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels*, 375.

³⁴ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 93. Note the equally firm statement by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 7.108.1) who says that “for just as there was only a single teaching of all the apostles, so too there is only one tradition.” Quoted in HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 16.

³⁵ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 94.

then, rather than withholding them for a privileged few, they would undoubtedly have handed them down to their successors so that these may teach them to the churches. Hence the formulation “they *would* certainly *have* transmitted” (*his vel maxime traderent*).³⁶

This public transmission was usually done within a liturgical setting. In fact, shortly after the first explicit use of the term ‘gospel’ in reference to a writing and after it has been equated with the term ‘Memoirs of the apostles’ Justin Martyr describes the Dominical liturgical ceremony of the Christians where we see these very ‘Memoirs’ being read out (1 *Apol.* 67.3):

And on the day called Sunday there is an assembly of those who dwell in cities or the countryside, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, for as long as there is time.³⁷

Public reading in a Christian “assembly” (ἐκκλησία)—which in time took up a liturgical character—indeed continued to be one of the criteria used by the church authorities for many years to determine whether a writing was authentic or not. Though this criterion cannot be applied with certainty to each and every canonical book of the NT, it nevertheless applies for any that was considered a Gospel.³⁸

Marcion’s controversy in the mid-second century brought forward another important characteristic of the Gospels: they were linked with the OT. This is also clear from the writings of the NT that give us a glimpse of what the apostolic preaching may have been like.³⁹ Indeed, the apostles never ceased to preach that the Christ event was all in fulfillment of the Scriptures of Israel. Without the OT, one cannot fully understand Jesus. Thus, a writing that claimed to be a Gospel

³⁶ For more on the ‘remote condition’ conditional clauses, cfr. H.W. SMYTH, *Greek Grammar*, G.M. MESSING (rev. by), Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1956, §§2302–2328; E. VAN EMDE BOAS, A. RIJKSBARON, L. HUITINK, M. DE BAKKER, *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge - New York 2019, 554–555; J.H. ALLEN, J.B. GREENOUG, *New Latin Grammar*, Ginn & Co., Boston 1903, § 517; R.D. HUDDLESTON, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2002, 748–755. We obtained the Latin text from, IRÉNÉE DE LYON, *Contre les hérésies. Livre III. Texte et Traduction*, A. ROUSSEAU, L. DOUTRELEAU (trans.), Cerf, Paris 1974, 30.

³⁷ JUSTIN MARTYR, *Apologies*, 258–259.

³⁸ See the discussions in B.M. METZGER, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987^{repr. 1989}, 251–254; P. GRELOT, *La liturgia nel Nuovo Testamento*, C. VALENTINO (trans.), Borla, Roma 1992, 29–42; L.M. McDONALD, *Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question*, in L.M. McDONALD, J.A. SANDERS (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody 2002, 432–434; V.A. ALIKIN, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2010, 147–182.

³⁹ See the analysis in C.H. DODD, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1956, 9–17, 21–24.

yet despised or disregarded the writings of the OT or failed to consider Christ as their fulfillment, could hardly stand up to its claim for long.

Yet perhaps the most important characteristic of all is the fact that a written account claiming to be a Gospel should necessarily bring the Christian in contact with the living person of Jesus Christ. As Pokorný states,

the framing of the Jesus traditions by the proclaimed Easter gospel linked the words and deeds of Jesus with the present time of the readers. The narrative of the Gospel was not only a memory that evoked the past of Jesus' earthly life, but it was intended as its living re-presentation. The re-presentation mostly takes place though re-telling, meditation or interpretation, but the text itself invites the reader/hearer to understand it as an address and proclamation.⁴⁰

IV. DOES THE 'GTH' QUALIFY AS A GOSPEL?

The *GTh* is a document⁴¹ from late antiquity that claims two realities, (1) that it is a Gospel and (2) that it was written by the apostle Thomas. Since from very early times it was considered a heretical document, it soon went out of circulation and for many centuries was only known through references to it or about it in the works of ecclesiastical writers and early scholars.⁴² Only four copies of the document exist: P. Oxy. I 1, P. Oxy. IV 654, P. Oxy. IV 655 and Coptic Text (Nag Hammadi, Codex II). Various dates, from mid second century to mid third century CE, have been suggested by scholars for the composition of the Greek texts, whereas the Coptic version is usually dated to between the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The earliest mention of the document is by Hippolytus of Rome in his work *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, dated to c. 225 CE. Therefore, from this earliest explicit reference and the papyrological data, we can say that the latest possible date for the document's authorship was the first quarter of the third century.⁴³

The document contains a number of sayings attributed to Jesus, which modern scholars have divided into 114. It contains "no narratives of any kind, no report of Jesus' activities, his healings, or his exorcisms, no accounts of his travels,

⁴⁰ POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 127.

⁴¹ The following brief discussion on the manuscripts of the *GTh* is a summary of the ample presentation and discussion in GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 3–13.

⁴² Gathercole gives up to 48 references spanning from the 3rd century to the 17th century. He considers 39 of these to be "fairly clear" whereas the rest are "dubious." Scholars also admit the possibility that many of these references are not to the actual *GTh* but to other works attributed to Thomas, such as the "Infancy Gospel of Thomas". Apart from the *loci* in which the *GTh* is mentioned, Gathercole also discusses passages in ancient writings which are references to the contents of the *GTh*. See the discussion in *ibidem*, 35–90.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 113–116.

his passion, or his resurrection".⁴⁴ For this reason it has also been frequently called a 'Sayings Gospel'. The document has elicited great interest in modern scholarship especially because it appears to prove that a sayings document like the hypothetical Q of the synoptic studies was possible in early Christianity.⁴⁵ Indeed, many of the sayings in the *GTh* are similar to some found in the Synoptics. This fact has caused a great debate to arise amongst scholars as to the level and direction of dependence between the *GTh* and the Synoptic Gospels. Some posit that the document indeed collects oral traditions going back to Jesus Himself and is independent of the Synoptic gospels, whereas others hold that it derives its content from the Synoptics themselves.⁴⁶ The question is by no means settled and we will not seek to do it here. Our interest, however, lies in identifying whether the document can be referred to as a 'Gospel' given what we have established with regards to the term 'Gospel' as well as the characteristics and content of the *GTh*.

The first point of discussion is offered by the very first phrase of the writing which reads:⁴⁷

These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke, and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down.

What calls our attention is the fact that the document introduces itself as a collection of "secret sayings" given by Jesus to Thomas the Apostle. This fact already puts us on guard with regards to what we have observed concerning the nature of the Gospel as a public proclamation both in its oral and written form. Yet this is not the only part of the document that advocates a certain secrecy. In saying 13, Jesus separates Thomas from the other disciples and speaks to him in secret. When the other disciples wish to know the message given to him, Thomas refuses to tell them, saying,

⁴⁴ B. EHRMAN, Z. PLESE, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, 305.

⁴⁵ Cfr. J.K. ELLIOTT (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York 1993^{repr. 2005}, 124.

⁴⁶ E.K. BROADHEAD, *The Thomas-Jesus Connection*, in T. HOLMÉN, S.E. PORTER (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3, Brill, Leiden- Boston 2011, 2061–2065; M.S. GOODACRE, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2012; GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 176–184.

⁴⁷ See GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 189–194. This phrase is usually considered the prologue to the document, hence it is not usually numbered with the sayings. See Gathercole's edition, whose translation from the Coptic and Greek texts we have used, as well as P. POKORNÝ, *Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas: From Interpretations to the Interpreted*, T&T Clark, New York 2009, for an in depth analysis to each saying.

13.8 'If I told you one of the words which he spoke to me, you would pick up stones and throw them at me. But fire would come forth from the stones, and burn you.'

We find a similar advocacy to secrecy in sayings 62 and 108 where Jesus supposedly reveals his mysteries only to such as are worthy of them, to those who "drink from his mouth", which means that He has not revealed Himself publicly:

62.1 Jesus said, 'I speak my mysteries to those who [are worthy of my] mysteries

108.1 Jesus said, 'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me. 108.2 I myself will become him, 108.3 and what are hidden will be revealed to him.'

Closely tied to this idea of secrecy is the manner in which access to salvation is presented.⁴⁸ As we have observed in our discussion on the term *εὐαγγέλιον*, early Christians were convinced that there was only one Gospel and it is probably for this reason that they would use the term in the singular rather than in its plural form, which is how we find it in secular literature of the time. This *εὐαγγέλιον* consisted in the message that salvation was possible only through Jesus Christ, more precisely, through belief in and union to His Paschal mystery. Yet there are many sayings in the *GTh* that present a different view. Below are some of them:

1. And he said, 'Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.'

19.1 Jesus said, 'Blessed is he who has come into being before he has come into being.

19.2 If you become disciples of mine and heed my words, these stones will serve you.

19.3 For you have five trees in paradise, which do not move in summer or winter, and

whose leaves do not fall. 19.4 Whoever knows them will not taste death.'

49.1 Jesus said, 'Blessed are the solitary and elect, for you will find the kingdom. 49.2

For you are from it, and you will return there again.'

75. Jesus said, 'Many are standing at the door, but (only) the solitary will enter the bridal chamber.'

Sayings 1 and 19 link final salvation ("not tasting death") to the need to learn the meaning of some mystery: in the case of saying 1, it is the meaning and/or interpretation of all the sayings contained in the book, whereas in saying 19, it is the knowledge of particular trees which the disciple has in paradise.⁴⁹ In the book of Revelation, we do find a call to heed to the words of the prophecy contained

⁴⁸ In fact, this is not the only theme in which we notice differences between how it is presented in the *GTh* and the canonical Gospels. For more on this, GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 145–154; P. POKORNÝ, *Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 29–34.

⁴⁹ Pokorný interprets the cryptic saying 'knowing the trees' to mean 'to take seriously all the sayings of Jesus' though he does not explain how he arrives at this, Cfr. POKORNÝ, *Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 63.

in the book (Rev 1:3; 22:7) as well as a reference to evergreen and fruitful trees (Rev 22:2). Nevertheless, it is not knowledge of such realities that brings about salvation, but rather the blood of the Lamb (Rev 1:5–6; 5:9; 7:14; 12:10–12). In saying 49 and 75, being “solitary” is considered fundamental for entering the kingdom. Here we have certain ideas foreign to the NT such as the pre-existence of the soul—the blessed return to their initial state before the primordial fall—as well as the preference for the *one* (solitary) over an above the many—an idea which downplays the reality of the community of believers. Both ideas are contrary to salvation as presented in the other writings of the NT and hence of the Gospel that was preached by the apostles.

Another aspect that emerges from the document and which inclines the reader to not consider it a Gospel is the fact that there are some sayings that are in blatant opposition to the OT Scriptures and, at times, even to the other writings of the NT. For instance,

1. In sayings 21 and 37, nakedness is presented as a goal for the person who would be saved, whereas in all scripture it is a sign of shame:⁵⁰

21.1 Mary said to Jesus, ‘What are your disciples like?’ 21.2 He said, ‘They are like children who are [so]journing in a field which does not belong to them. 21.3 When the owners of the field come, they will say, “Let us have our field.” 21.4 They strip naked in their presence, in order to let them have it, to give their field to them.

37.1 His disciples said, ‘When will you be revealed to us, and when will we see you?’ 37.2 Jesus said to them, ‘When you undress and are not ashamed, and take your clothes and leave them under your feet like little children and tread upon them, 37.3 then [you will s]ee the Son of the living one and you will not be afraid.’

Scholars are of the opinion that the sayings are metaphorical, so that the shedding off of clothes is in fact a reference to the “soul’s renunciation of the body or the world”.⁵¹ This meaning is not in any way contrary to Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, in the case of the latter, nakedness is never presented as the final state of the person. Rather, after the body or worldly desires are shed off, there is always a reference to “a recovering” or “being clothed anew”.⁵²

⁵⁰ Cfr. Gen 3:7; 9:21–23; Lev 18; 20; 1 Sam 19:24; Isa 20:2–5; 47:3; 58:7; Lam 1:8; Ezek 16:8, 36–40; 23:10, 18, 28–30; Hos 2:2–3; Amos 2:16; Mic 1:8; Nah 3:5; Hab 2:15; Matt 25:36–38; 2 Cor 5:1–5; Rev 3:17–18; 16:15; 17:16.

⁵¹ GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 365.

⁵² In the book of Revelations (Cfr. 3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:9–11; 7:9–10, 13–17; 19:7–8; 22:14) the blessed are always clothed in white. In 2 Cor 5:1–5, St. Paul speaks of being unclothed with regards to

2. The same goes for saying 14:

14.1 Jesus said to them, ‘If you fast, you will give birth to sin in yourselves. 14.2 And if you pray, you will be condemned. 14.3 And if you give alms, you will do ill to your spirits.’

Here, fasting, prayer and almsgiving are condemned, which is contrary to what we find in all Scripture, where they are frequently commended as good works pertaining to those that seek to please God.⁵³ Accordingly, the rejection of these acts of piety can be “understood as a protest against the form of piety practiced in the great Church”.⁵⁴

3. Similarly, saying 12 openly contradicts what we find in all the other writings of the NT, though in this case it is with regards to historical data rather than doctrine:

12.1 The disciples said to Jesus, ‘We know that you will depart from us. Who will be leader over us?’ 12.2 Jesus said to them, ‘Wherever you have come from, you shall go to James the Just, for the sake of whom heaven and earth came into being.’

In this saying, James the Just (known in the NT as James the brother of the Lord, cf. Gal 1:19) is singled out as the leader of the disciples, whereas in the NT as well as in other early Christian texts, it was Simon Peter who was considered the leader of the Church.⁵⁵ Apart from contradicting this historical fact, the saying may also be suggesting that James was a source of revelation alternative to Peter and the other disciples.⁵⁶ If this were the case, then we would have a scenario similar to saying 13 whereby Jesus does not reveal His mysteries to all the Apostles.

We also mentioned that an important characteristic of the Gospel is that it places the believer in a loving relationship with Jesus and leads him/her to become like Jesus. There are, however, sayings in the *GTh* that leave one appalled at the image of Jesus they portray and hence make it difficult to enter into a relationship with Him. Perhaps the most emblematic are sayings 61 and 114.

mortality, but he also immediately speaks of being clothing anew with immortality. Pokorný fails to notice this when he cites this verse in support of his opinion that “The *nakedness* of the disciples as servants (literally “children”) means that their souls will (after death) put off the body, as the apostle Paul says in 2 Cor 5:1–5”. Cfr. POKORNÝ, *Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 65.

⁵³ Cfr. 1 Kgs 21:17–29; Neh 9; Dan 9; Joel 1:13–15; 2:12–14; Tob 4:11; 12:8–9; Sir 7:10; Matt 6:1–18; Lk 12:33–34; Acts 10:1–6; 13:1–3; 14:23; etc.

⁵⁴ POKORNÝ, *Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 57.

⁵⁵ Cfr. Matt 16:18–19; Mark 14:37–38; Luke 22:31–32; 24:34; John 20:1–2; 21:2–3, 15–19; Acts 1:15–26; 10:1–11:18; 12:1–17; Gal 1:18–19; 2:7–9; etc.

⁵⁶ See the discussion in GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 249–253.

61.1 Jesus said, ‘Two will rest on a couch, one will die, the other will live.’ 61.2 Salome said, ‘Who are you, man, that you have come up as from one on to my couch and eaten from my table?’ 61.3 Jesus said to her, ‘I am he who is from the equal. I have been given some of what belongs to my Father.’ 61.4 (Salome said,) ‘I am your disciple.’ 61.5 (Jesus said,) ‘For this reason I say, “When he becomes equal, he will be filled with light. But when he becomes divided, he will be filled with darkness.”’

114.1 Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary come out from us, because women are not worthy of life.’ 114.2 Jesus said, ‘Behold, I will draw her so that I might make her male, so that she also might be a living spirit resembling you males. 114.3 For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’

Saying 61 is very strange indeed, since it insinuates a scene of intimacy with possible sexual connotations between the Lord and a certain Salome; saying 114 on the other hand is downright biased against women in affirming that they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven for the mere fact of being females: this doctrine does not appear anywhere in the Scriptures and outrightly goes against the image portrayed of Jesus and the Apostles as accepting women disciples and believers, as they are, and even commending them for their faith.⁵⁷ It rather reflects the tendency by esoteric groups sprouting around the end of the first century which were “curtailing the role of women in the life of Christian communities”.⁵⁸

V. CONCLUSION

Like the other four canonical Gospels, nowhere in the *GTh* do we find the writing referring to itself as a ‘Gospel’. Yet, unlike the four canonical gospels, the text ends with a postscript that reads: “The Gospel according to Thomas.”

Given that the earliest references to the writing already call it the “Gospel according to Thomas”, it is likely that the postscript was part of the original text and not a later addition. Nevertheless, from the analysis we have done of the term *εὐαγγέλιον* as used by the early Christians and the characteristics we have identified as necessary for a writing to be rightfully considered an *εὐαγγέλιον*, we can conclude that *GTh* really automatically excludes itself from being a likely candidate for the Christian canon. The early Christians could not recognize in it the Gospel that had been preached to them and whose voice they could still hear in the living Tradition of the Church.

The *GTh* certainly has some value arising from the fact that, being an antique document, it acts as one more window into the first centuries of Christianity and

⁵⁷ Cfr. Mark 15:40–41 par.; Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42; 24:10; John 11–12; Acts 1:14; 2:18; 16:1, 14–15; 18:2, 18, 24–26; Rom 16:1–3; 2 Tim 1:5 etc.

⁵⁸ POKORNÝ, *Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 154.

is an indirect witness to the canonical gospels themselves. From it, scholars may obtain information concerning the religious life and beliefs of a particular group of persons who lived in that epoch. Yet perhaps this is the only aspect it has in common with the canonical Gospels. The *GTb* cannot claim from Christians, or scholars for that matter, the title ‘Gospel’, since it lacks the necessary characteristics that would give it the authority to do so, much unlike the canonical Gospels. At most, we can say that the *GTb* can be categorized among writings which, as Pokorný states,

are not Gospels in the sense of biographies of Jesus, culminating in the Passion Story and Easter. They include only some motifs relating to the life of Jesus along with other traditions; they “usurped” the title “Gospel” in order to secure their authority among Christians.⁵⁹

ABSTRACT

In the first centuries of Christianity many writings appeared bearing the title “Gospel” yet only four of them ended up being recognized as such and as worthy of being read, copied, revered and transmitted through the ages until our day. The rest were considered spurious and most ended up being lost to posterity. Thanks to the new-found interest in archeology in the 19th and 20th centuries, many of them have been found and made available for scholarly study. One of these—the Gospel of Thomas—has received a great deal of interest mainly due to its similarity both in its form to the hypothetical document “Q” of the two source theory behind the formation of the synoptic Gospels, as well as in some of its contents to some of the sayings of the Lord found in the canonical Gospels. That of course raises the question: why was the Gospel of Thomas not included among the canonical Gospels? In this paper, we will examine the concept of “Gospel” in a bid to elucidate what it is that was found to be common to the 4 canonical Gospels and yet lacking in the Gospel of Thomas, so much so that, despite the similarities with the other four, it ended up being altogether rejected.

⁵⁹ POKORNÝ, *From the Gospel to the Gospels*, 193.