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The Origin and Meaning of Εὐαγγέλιον in the Pauline Corpus

Andrew J. Spallek

With the advent of any new body of knowledge a correspondingly new vocabulary must be devised to convey that knowledge precisely and concisely. The advent of Christianity was no exception. As the young Christian church came of age in the Mediterranean world, terminology had to be developed in order to communicate its precious message to outsiders. Technical terms began to emerge in apostolic preaching. One of the most basic of such terms is the name given to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, εὐαγγέλιον.

Part One of this study will examine the origin and usage of εὐαγγέλιον in the Greek world and in Judaica, including the gospels and Acts. Part Two is an overview of the way in which Paul uses the term. Finally, Part Three will attempt to address the questions as to the content and origin of the messages to which Paul refers as εὐαγγέλιον.

I. The Origin and Meaning of Εὐαγγέλιον

A. *The Usage in Non-Biblical Greek*

The basic meaning of the term εὐαγγέλιον is "that which is proper to an εὐάγγελος."¹ An εὐάγγελος, or εὐαγγέλιος, is "a giver of glad tidings."² Εὐαγγέλιον thence develops two related senses. From the standpoint of those to whom an εὐάγγελος comes, that which is proper to him is the good news. But to the εὐάγγελος himself, that which is proper to him is the reward that he receives as the bearer of that good news. Thus, the oldest known example of εὐαγγέλιον (Homer, *Odyssey* 14, 152-153, 166-167) means "reward for good news."³ There is no trace of this meaning in Pauline usage unless it would be for the statement in 1 Corinthians 9:14 that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel, but this association is dubious. The context in which Paul places this statement is that of cultic temple worship. Furthermore, Paul identifies it as a command of the Lord, probably referring to Luke 10:7, where Jesus instructs His disciples that "the laborer deserves his wages."⁴

The second meaning of εὐαγγέλιον, the message of good

news, is certainly that which is primarily taken over by Paul in the New Testament. It should be noted that the singular is not often used in this sense in extra-biblical literature. It is usually the plural, εὐαγγέλια, that means "glad tidings." Too much importance should not be placed upon this phenomenon, but perhaps the Christian emphasis is upon the singular, unique, authentic gospel in contra-distinction to other false or less important εὐαγγέλια.

The coming of the herald of glad tidings in the ancient world was quite an unmistakable sight. Usually bringing news of victory in battle, his face would shine. His spear would be decked with a laurel, his head would be crowned, he would be swinging a branch of palms. He would raise his right hand and call out "Χαῖρε . . . νικῶμεν."⁵ This announcement, "we are victorious," is the common point which governs both Septuagintal and Pauline usage of εὐαγγέλιον. Victory, or the peace which attends it, is said to bring σωτηρία to the people. Its association with the concept of "salvation" further facilitated the transference of εὐαγγέλιον to the theology of the New Testament.

In order to thank the gods, but also to hold them to their gift, the recipients of the εὐαγγέλιον would offer sacrifices. The phrase εὐαγγέλια θύειν is first found in Isocrates.⁶ The concept of sacrifice in response to the gospel is found in Paul only indirectly in his theology of giving, especially perhaps Romans 12:1, where Paul encourages his readers to offer their own bodies as living sacrifices to the God who has revealed His gospel to them. Thanksgiving in general as a response to the gospel is prominent in Paul.

From the specific usage of εὐαγγέλιον as news of victory in battle, a generalization was made. The word εὐαγγέλιον came to mean any important good news, even of a political or private nature. This development is clear from a passage in Philostratus which indicates that Nero ordered εὐαγγέλια to be offered after his success in the games. Some cities misunderstood and believed that he had been victorious in war and taken some Olympians captive.⁸ The use of εὐαγγέλιον in this sense became so popular that a caricature appears in Aristophanes in which a sacrifice is offered at the εὐαγγέλιον that anchovies had become cheaper.⁹

A component to the understanding of εὐαγγέλιον under present discussion is the concept that it "does not merely declare salvation; it effects it."¹⁰ The message itself is the cause for rejoicing and sacrificing. For this reason the messenger runs swiftly, trying to be the first to bring the precious message. A messenger can be punished for his neglect, "for he has deprived the recipients of their good fortune."¹¹ Bad news would purposely be suppressed. Sometimes, for political reasons, false εὐαγγέλια were circulated,¹² in which case the messenger carrying the true message could have been said to have run in vain. Perhaps therein lies a backdrop to Paul's mention of another (false) gospel in Galatians 1:6-7. One can graphically imagine the image of a messenger, ill with exhaustion, having run in vain (Galatians 2:2) because the recipients have accepted a different εὐαγγέλιον.

Eventually the term εὐαγγέλιον came into use in the imperial cult. The striking calendar inscription from Priene of about 9 B.C. proclaims that all time should be reckoned from the date of the birth of Emperor Augustus, because "the birthday of the god was the beginning of εὐαγγέλ[ιου] on his account."¹³ Gerhard Friedrich also quotes inscriptions announcing the εὐαγγέλια of the emperor's coming of age and his ascension to the throne. Clearly Friedrich's statement is accurate: "the New Testament speaks the language of its day."¹⁴

B. The Usage in the Septuagint and Judaica

The substantive is rare in the Septuagint, never appearing in the neuter singular. The plural is used in 2 Kings 4:10 (2 Samuel in the Massoretic Text) in the sense of a messenger's reward for the good news which he thought that he was bringing, although in this case the "reward" turned out to be death. The neuter plural or feminine singular (the reading is uncertain) appears in 2 Kings 18:22, meaning "reward for good news." In the entire passage of 2 Kings 18:19-27, which describes the reporting to David of the news of Absalom's death, the substantive is used three times (the other two occurrences referring to the actual message) and the cognate verb appears four times. It is ironic that in both of these passages, the "good news" is really sorrowful news for the recipient. One other occurrence of the substantive is 4 Kings 7:9 (2 Kings in the Massoretic Text), where

it refers to actual good news (the defeat of the Syrians).¹⁵ In all of these places, εὐαγγελία translates the Hebrew *b'sōrah*. The noun in the Septuagint is always used in the secular sense.

Although the noun is rare in the Septuagint, the related verb occurs frequently: nine times in Kings; six times in Isaiah; three times in the Psalms; and once each in Joel, Nahum, Jeremiah, 1 Chronicles, and 4 Maccabees. Unlike the noun, the verb εὐαγγελίζω is used both in the secular and religious sense, always translating the Hebrew *bsr*. Apparent cognates of *bsr* are an Arabic verb meaning "to be joyful (as at the birth of a son)" and an Ethiopic verb meaning "to bring a joyful message."¹⁶ Because of 1 Samuel 4:17, where the *m^bhassēr* proclaims bad news (the defeat of Israel, loss of the ark, and death of the sons of Eli), and of 1 Kings 1:42 and Isaiah 52:7, where the message is characterized as "good" by the addition of *tōbh*, it has been conjectured that the basic meaning of *bsr* is simply "to bring a message." Friedrich, however, maintains that such is not the case. The joy of the message is contained in the root *bsr*. Since the message came to be associated with the battlefield and news of victory, every messenger from battle came, by extension, to be called a *m^bhassēr*, even if the message brought bad news.¹⁷ By far the most predominant use of *bsr*, as of εὐαγγελίζω, is the proclaiming of good news, especially news of victory.

Most significant for the understanding of Paul's use of εὐαγγελιον and εὐαγγελίζω is its appearance in the Psalms and Isaiah. In Psalm 39:9 (LXX; Psalm 40 MT), the good news that is proclaimed to the congregation of Israel is that of the righteousness of God. Psalm 67:11 (LXX; Psalm 68 MT) announces the victory of God over His enemies. It is Psalm 95 (LXX; Psalm 96 MT), however, that touches most upon New Testament usage. Verse 2 enjoins people to "εὐαγγελιζεσθε His salvation," literally, to tell the good news of His salvation." There is a sense of urgency here that is more fully developed in Isaiah. "A new era begins also for the nations. For Yahweh is a God of the Gentiles as well as Israel."¹⁸ But this phraseology also parallels the inscriptions from the Roman imperial cult regarding the ascension of the emperor as the beginning of glad tidings and salvation.

It is especially Isaiah, however, who provides the New Testament writers and speakers with the theological charge of εὐαγγέλιον and εὐαγγελίζω. Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7 announce the coming of the Redeemer King into His kingdom.¹⁹ But the message of the evangelist is always that of the sender, the Lord Himself, as Paul points out in citing the latter passage at Romans 10:15.²⁰ The messenger's authority when proclaiming the gospel is that of his commission. In Isaiah 60:6 it is the Gentiles who come streaming into Jerusalem to honor the Redeemer King and to proclaim the salvation (LXX) of the Lord. This is clearly a messianic reference. It is above all Isaiah 61:1, however, that provides the springboard into the evangelism of the New Testament. The messianic age begins with the fulfilment of this prophecy. Jesus claimed to constitute its fulfilment in Luke 7:22 and Matthew 11:5. The "gospel" is one of forgiveness by means of God's favor, His grace alone. The "gospel" is also God's righteous vengeance which defeats evil and is therefore a source of comfort for His people. This message became the heart of Paul's εὐαγγέλιον.

The messianic nature of these passages was emphasized in rabbinic Judaism. The coming of the *m'bhassēr*, the "evangelist," becomes the focal point, for his coming means the beginning of the messianic age of heaven on earth. "Everything depends on his appearance and on his act of proclamation."²¹ There is no unanimity among the rabbis concerning his identity. Sometimes he is Elijah, sometimes an unknown figure, sometimes the Messiah himself.²²

C. *The Usage in the Gospels and Acts*

We have already seen that Jesus applied Isaiah 61:1 to Himself and, in so doing, ushered in the messianic age. But it is interesting to note that the ἄγγελοι are the first New Testament εὐαγγελοι. Gabriel tells Zechariah the good news about the upcoming birth of John. An angel tells the shepherds the good news of the birth of the Messiah, the Lord. Thus, Mark can include both the events surrounding John and those surrounding Jesus in what he calls the "gospel of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Elsewhere in the gospels the content of the εὐαγγέλιον is not specified, except that it is the "gospel of the kingdom of God." The reader is expected to be familiar with its meaning and content. In the Book of Acts Luke

makes it clear that the gospel is the Lord Jesus Christ. Once he quotes Paul identifying "the gospel of His grace (20:24)."

In regard to the remaining non-Pauline books of the New Testament, the term εὐαγγέλιον appears twice in Hebrews, four times in 1 Peter, and three times in Revelation. No new nuances in meaning or origin are provided by these passages.

II. Εὐαγγέλιον in Paul

The Apostle Paul uses the noun sixty times in his epistles. The verb is used twenty-one times excluding the variant reading at Romans 15:29. The distribution is as follows:

<u>Book</u>	<u>Noun</u>	<u>Verb</u>
Romans	9	3
1 Corinthians	8	6
2 Corinthians	8	2
Galatians	7	7
Ephesians	4	2
Philippians	9	0
Colossians	2	0
1 Thessalonians	6	1
2 Thessalonians	2	0
1 Timothy	1	0
2 Timothy	3	0
Titus	0	0
Philemon	1	0

In the course of these occurrences Paul uses εὐαγγέλιον or εὐαγγελίζω in the absolute sense (with no significant explanation or qualification) forty-eight times (59% of the time). He qualifies it in some way as the gospel of Christ fourteen times (17%). Thirteen times Paul gives a minor explanation, such as "gospel of peace" or briefly tells what the gospel effects in its hearers (16%). In five places Paul uses the term with a major explanation or exposition of the gospel (6%). In only one instance (1 Thessalonians 3:6) does Paul use the term in a secular sense (1%). It is plain that Paul, like Matthew, Mark, and Luke, expects his readers to identify the εὐαγγέλιον readily. Where explana-

tion is given, it is for emphasis or review. It is largely from those six percent of Pauline usages where a major explanation is given that we must piece together Paul's definition of εὐαγγέλιον.

The question of the source of Paul's meaning of the term εὐαγγέλιον is impossible to answer with certainty. Paul certainly was familiar with rabbinic messianic expectations, which would suggest familiarity with εὐαγγελίζω. That these prophecies or expectations were fulfilled in Christ was revealed to him by the Lord Himself. It would be easy to bridge the gap from messianic language of the Septuagint to Christ, especially since Paul had access to those who had personally heard Jesus explicitly bridging that gap. Perhaps Paul also had access to a written source of the quotations of Jesus that included His application of Isaiah 61:1 to Himself. In any case Paul had the assurance of direct revelation. The generalization from verb to noun was a simple one for Paul, especially since the Graeco-Roman world used εὐαγγέλιον routinely. Indeed, Paul could make use of metaphors and allusions that took into account the current secular use as well. Of course, it is possible that Paul simply adopted a term that the infant church had already designated as its name for the proclamation of Christ.

III. Paul's Definition of Εὐαγγέλιον and Its Origin

There has been some debate concerning the question of whether it was Paul or someone else who established the term εὐαγγέλιον in the vocabulary in the New Testament. This debate is clearly superfluous to the question of what Paul meant by εὐαγγέλιον. It has been established that the term in secular usage meant "good-tidings," usually concerning victory in battle or a significant birth. Theological use in the Old Testament took on a decidedly messianic sense. By a combination of these two meanings, with heavy emphasis on the theological, Paul refers to a gospel which is entirely familiar to his readers. Paul does not have to define the term for his readers. He tells them truths about the gospel, describing it in the process. It works faith (Romans 10:16; 15:16). It is the message of peace (Ephesians 2:17). But such statements do not reveal Paul's definition of εὐαγγέλιον.

This study does not seek to describe "Paul's gospel." It instead seeks to define what Paul means by the term εὐαγγέλιον. To this end two passages are of primary importance: Romans 1:1-6 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Second Timothy 1:10 and 2:8 also contain a brief statement of the content of the gospel. These statements are not meant to be complete expositions of the εὐαγγέλιον. The death of Jesus is not mentioned in Romans 1:1-6. The incarnation is not mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Clearly the heart of the εὐαγγέλιον is the message of the saving work of Jesus. Anything connected with that event can be called gospel.²³ Indeed, the heart of the gospel is Christ Himself. Yet there are some specific components to that which Paul calls εὐαγγέλιον.

In Romans 1:1-6 Paul emphasizes the "promised" nature of the εὐαγγέλιον. The gospel that was promised by the prophets of God was fulfilled in His Son, who was in fact born a descendant of David, according to the promise. The term "prophets" in this passage should probably not be taken too specifically, but rather in the sense of "all Old Testament writers."²⁴ An important component to the definition of εὐαγγέλιον is the fact that the gospel is none other than that which had been promised beforehand by God. The term προεπαγγελλομαι is used elsewhere in the New Testament only at 2 Corinthians 9:5. The object of this promise is Christ Jesus, born "according to the flesh." The incarnation is another component of Paul's definition of εὐαγγέλιον.

The resurrection of Jesus is of primary importance to Paul's definition of εὐαγγέλιον. This point is stressed in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, but it also receives emphasis in Romans 1. The resurrection is extremely important to Paul because it was the *resurrected* Christ that had revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus. This experience was the event that absolutely confirmed the messiahship of Jesus. Paul had certainly known of Jesus before His death. As a Pharisee Paul had surely made it his business to know. Paul had thought, of course, that the "interference" of Jesus would cease with His death. Paul was dismayed to learn that "the Way" had survived this event. Some of the followers of Jesus claimed validity for their sect by virtue of the resurrection of their rabbi. To the Pharisee Saul this claim was unbelievable. "God had cursed

Jesus by death on the cross."²⁵ But in a moment all was changed. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, no longer could Paul deny the resurrection. If he could not deny the resurrection, he could not deny the messiahship of Jesus. Thus, the resurrection is the turning point, the point at which Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God after all and, therefore, a vital component of the εὐαγγέλιον. Furthermore, it was the event on the road to Damascus which set Paul apart for the εὐαγγέλιον of God. Once Paul had been simply a Pharisee ("separated one"); now Paul is a "Pharisee" ("separated one") unto the εὐαγγέλιον.²⁶ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has listed three identifying characteristics that a Pharisee would see in Jesus: a claim to messianic sonship, a rejection of the absolute authority of the law, and a claim to resurrection.²⁷ It is interesting to note that the first and third of these are affirmed in Paul's definition of εὐαγγέλιον in Romans 1:1-6. The alleged repudiation of the law is not affirmed because the allegation is inaccurate. Romans 5-6 especially go on to point out the accurate relationship between Christ and the law.

The emphasis on the resurrection of Christ is also prominent in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and 2 Timothy 2:8. Once again the resurrection is the guarantee of salvation, the key to unlocking the gospel. Also prominent is the role of the Scriptures in the εὐαγγέλιον. In 1 Corinthians 15:4 the εὐαγγέλιον states that the death and the resurrection of Jesus took place κατὰ τὰς γραφάς, "according to the Scriptures." This is a point of crucial importance. Not only was the birth of Jesus foretold, but so also do His death ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ("for the sake of our sins") and His resurrection occur in accordance with the word of God. As in Romans 1, the heart of the εὐαγγέλιον is rooted in the Scriptures. This fact is also implied in 2 Timothy 2:8, where the resurrected Christ is designated as "from the seed of David," a designation rooted in prophecy. All three of Paul's "definitions" of the εὐαγγέλιον (Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 15, and 2 Timothy 2) share the emphasis upon the resurrection of Christ and the scriptural foundation for the saving work of Jesus.

There is no discrepancy in that 1 Corinthians 15 mentions neither the incarnation nor the birth of Christ, while Romans 1 makes no

mention of the death of Christ. The death of Jesus is implied in His resurrection. The incarnation is implied in His death and burial. All of the elements are present and can be inferred from the resurrection. Paul's definition of εὐαγγέλιον, therefore, can be stated as follows: God's promised act of salvation accomplished whereby He sent His Son to be incarnate, of the seed of David, to die for our sins, and raised Him from the dead as a guarantee of that salvation. Anything connected with this truth is, for Paul, εὐαγγέλιον. "Gospel' is Paul's personal way of expressing the Christ-event, the meaning that the person, life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus of Nazareth had and still has for human existence."²⁸ But, for Paul, εὐαγγέλιον is not simply a formula of words; εὐαγγέλιον is God in action. "The gospel does not merely bear witness to salvation history; it is itself salvation history."²⁹ The εὐαγγέλιον is the δόναμις of God for the salvation of all who believe (Romans 1:16).

The origin of the εὐαγγέλιον is of primary importance to Paul for determining its genuineness. Especially important to understanding the question of origin is the relationship of the concept of tradition (παράδοσις) to that of revelation (ἀποκάλυψις). The scope of the present study prevents an in-depth analysis of this question, but the basic relationship can be ascertained. In Galatians 1:11-12 Paul vehemently defends the gospel which he proclaims as one given him, not by men, but by the direct revelation of Jesus Christ. Reconciling this statement with that of 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, which speaks of a gospel which Paul had received and passed on to the Corinthians, has proved difficult to some. For Paul, revelation and tradition have complementary functions. Tradition provides a way of expressing that which is revealed; revelation serves as a norm of tradition. Seyoon Kim expresses this relationship as the "distinction between essence and form."³⁰ According to Kim, Paul is referring to the former in Galatians 1:12 and to the latter in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. The essence of the gospel was received by Paul on the Damascus road, but the tradition, or traditional formula, "unfolds" the gospel. It provides a formalized method of communicating that essence.³¹ Kim errs, however, in ascribing a normative role to the tradition itself.³² It is not the tradition that is normative, but it is the revealed gospel

contained in the traditional formula that is normative. The revealed gospel is always that which is normative. Anyone who proclaims anything other than it is anathema (Galatians 1:8), whether it would be Paul, another apostle, or even an angel from heaven.³³ In the same way any means of proclaiming the revealed gospel is gospel. "Old Testament 'proof texts' become gospel if they are related to the gospel. The tradition of I Corinthians 15:3f. is gospel even though Paul received it by oral tradition while the gospel itself came to him by revelation and not by oral transmission."³⁴ Therefore, tradition stands in the service of the gospel, and not vice versa.³⁵

We cannot be certain of the specific origin of the παράδοσις utilized by Paul. According to the material of Acts, there are two main possibilities. Either Paul received this tradition from the first apostles (specifically Peter), or he received it in Damascus. Most scholars have assumed that this information was handed down to Paul when he went up to Jerusalem to meet with Peter (Galatians 1:18).³⁶ The term ἱστορήσαι, translated "meet," actually means "visit for the purpose of coming to know someone or something."³⁷ But the verb in Hellenistic usage had come to mean "come to know someone."³⁸ Some think that this is not a strong enough term to convey the meaning of Paul's acquiring the very specific catechetical information of Pauline tradition. A. M. Hunter favors the theory that this "tradition" represents, rather, an early Christian baptismal creed of the church in Damascus.³⁹ This creed would have been handed down to Paul preceding his baptism there by Ananias. According to Hunter, this formula represents a Palestinian, rather than a Hellenistic, tradition, but was handed down to Paul in a Hellenistic milieu.⁴⁰ In the end, actually, it makes little difference where Paul received the παράδοσις of 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Its origin is in the church of Jerusalem, and it represents the same gospel as that which Paul received by revelation on the road to Damascus.

Conclusion

The origin of the term in the Greek world was tied to a message of "glad tidings," usually of a victory in battle or the birth of an important child. In the Septuagint εὐαγγελίζω was used to translate forms derived from the root *bsr*. Old Testament usage

progressed from secular to theological and specifically messianic use. Paul may have taken up the term from the Old Testament, or he may have adopted it directly from the early church. But he must have also had in mind the secular meaning of the term when employing its use.

That which Paul meant by the term can be summed up as God's promised act of salvation accomplished whereby He sent His Son to be incarnate, of the seed of David, to die for our sins, and raised Him from the dead as a guarantee of that salvation. Paul received this gospel by direct revelation from the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and subsequently. However, Paul made use of traditional formal expressions of the gospel when they served his purpose of communicating that truth. Therefore, Paul used tradition to serve the εὐαγγέλιον.

Endnotes

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