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### The 'Gospel' and the 'Word': Exploring Some Early Christian Patterns\*

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#### *Abstract*

Graham Stanton and others have made important steps toward understanding the origins and development of 'gospel' language in earliest Christianity. This article attempts to provide a similar contribution regarding the use of 'word' language as synonymous with 'gospel' language among the earliest Christians. A distinctive and predominant 'word (of *x*)' pattern can be discerned in this regard, particularly evident in the Pauline writings and in the description of the Pauline mission in Acts. This use of 'word' language in synonymy with the gospel most likely had its origin in the legal and prophetic 'word' language of the Jewish scriptures, acquired through the eschatological self-understanding of the early Christians in general and the prophetic self-understanding of Paul in particular.

#### *Key Words*

Acts, εὐαγγέλιον, gospel, λόγος, Paul, word

#### *Introduction: 'Gospel' and 'Word'*

In his book *Jesus and Gospel*, Graham Stanton makes three important points about the use of εὐαγγέλιον among the earliest Christians (2004: 9-62). First, the 'gospel' language of the early Christians has its roots in the post-exilic hopes of Deutero-Isaiah (Stanton 2004: 13-20). This concept describes the 'good news' of God's kingship and his sovereign deliverance of his exiled people.<sup>1</sup> Stanton also sees this motif as an important part of

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1. Isa. 40.9; 52.7; 60.6; 61.1; cf. Ps. 96.2-3 (LXX 95.2-3).

Jesus' own thinking about himself and his ministry, noting that the general concept of the Christian message as 'good news' may stem from Jesus' own appropriation of this motif. In any case, this motif was present in some late Second Temple Jewish eschatological expectation.<sup>2</sup> However, as Stanton also notes, in Isaiah this theme is always expressed in verbal form and not as a noun, and thus this use is probably not the factor which directly motivated early Christian use of the noun εὐαγγέλιον.

Second, Stanton notes that the 'gospel' language of the early Christians mirrored that of the Roman imperial propaganda (see esp. Stanton 2004: 22-35). This is the most significant contribution of his research. He incorporates recent epigraphic research into his broader historical and textual study to demonstrate that imperial propaganda, focused on but not limited to the imperial cult, was widespread in the northeast quadrant of the Roman Empire throughout the first century, and that εὐάγγελ- language was relatively common and widely accessible in promoting the imperial agenda in this region.<sup>3</sup> These plural 'good tidings' (εὐαγγέλια) tended to focus on the accession of emperors and their subsequent benefaction to the Empire, often reciprocated by civic celebrations and religious sacrifices on the emperor's behalf. By contrast, the early Christians employed the singular εὐαγγέλιον as the ultimate message of 'good news' for the world.<sup>4</sup> Stanton also produces a plausible reconstruction in which the early Christian mirroring of this imperial εὐάγγελ- language could have taken place: Syrian Antioch during the brief reign of Gaius (37-41 CE) and his troubled relations with the Jewish people. Even if one finds this particular reconstruction too tentative,<sup>5</sup> it does illustrate nicely the general likelihood

2. *Pss. Sol.* 11.1; 1QH 18.14-15; 4Q521; 11QMelch.

3. The primary basis of this is the so-called 'Priene Inscription', of which Stanton notes that there are now thirteen fragments that have been discovered from five cities in Asia Minor (Priene, Apamea, Maeonia, Eumenia and Dorylaeum), and that the inscription was displayed prominently in Greek and in Latin throughout the region. See also Philo, *Embassy* 18-19, 231-32; Josephus, *J.W.* 4.618, 655-56. For these and other examples, see Stanton 2004: 28-32.

4. The basic point is sound, offering a plausible reason for the first-century Christians' exclusive use of the singular over against the virtually exclusive use of the plural in imperial propaganda. However, Stanton's explanation of the imperial use of the plural strikes this reader as unlikely: while it is true that there were many εὐαγγέλια about several different emperors and events, this does not explain why each individual instance of εὐαγγέλια in describing a given emperor or event should be plural. For example, the single event of the accession of Vespasian is described in Josephus as plural εὐαγγέλια (*J.W.* 4.618).

5. Horbury 2005 has since noted the convergence of these biblical and imperial

of his basic point: Christian use of the noun εὐαγγέλιον was certainly done with full consciousness of its associations with the imperial 'good tidings'.

As a third important point, Stanton notes a development in early Christian use of the term εὐαγγέλιον (Stanton 2004: 52-59). It first appears in the Pauline writings in reference to the orally proclaimed salvific message about Jesus centred on his death and resurrection. Roughly one hundred years later, in addition to this first use one finds the clear use of the term to refer to the 'Gospels', written narratives of Jesus' life and teachings culminating in his death and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> In between these two end points there is evidence of the trajectory by which the first use developed into the second, in particular the sporadic use of εὐαγγέλιον to include Jesus' teachings or even a broader narrative of Jesus' life. Again, even if one remains unconvinced by Stanton's particular thesis, that Matthew was the key innovator in using the term to describe his written narrative, the basic point regarding the early Christian development of the term εὐαγγέλιον is clear.

These three general points are not in themselves unique to Stanton's research,<sup>7</sup> but his work does provide a helpful and generally convincing amalgamation of these points. I will return to these matters throughout this article, but first it is important to note another significant observation in Stanton's essay which is too easily lost among his larger themes: εὐαγγέλιον is only one of a cluster of early Christian terms for the orally proclaimed salvific message about Jesus centred on his death and resurrection. In particular, Stanton repeatedly notes that 'word' language is also a prominent synonym for 'gospel' language, at times even used in explicit juxtaposition with one another (Stanton 2004: 12, 47-49, 51, 60). However, he leaves this observation relatively unexplored. In this article I will attempt to address this lacuna, to provide an account of the use of

motifs and terms in texts connected with Herodian Judaea. It would seem that this connection of 'gospel'-related ideas could have originated among Jewish Christians almost anywhere in the eastern Roman Empire, though Judaea and Syria are the most likely options.

6. The first clear use of εὐαγγέλια for the written Gospels is in Justin Martyr: οἱ γὰρ ἀπόστολοι ἐν τοῖς γενομένοις ὑπ' αὐτῶν ἀπομνημονεύμασιν ἃ καλεῖται εὐαγγέλια (*I Apol.* 66.3). See Stanton 2004: 12.

7. Stanton himself notes several predecessors in these lines of research, including: Schniewind 1927, 1931; Friedrich 1964 [1935]; Stuhlmacher 1968; Strecker 1975; Frankemölle 1994; Harrison 2002. To these one can also add others, notably Wright 1994; Hengel 2000; Horbury 2005.

λόγος and ῥῆμα as synonyms for εὐαγγέλιον in the earliest Christian writings.<sup>8</sup>

*‘Word’ as ‘Gospel’: Uncovering a Pattern*

While this synonymy of ‘word’ and ‘gospel’ is found in most early Christian writings, its earliest extensive use is in the Pauline letters. Paul’s own use of εὐαγγέλιον is paradoxically both clear and complex. Of course, there is no suggestion of a written ‘Gospel’ in Paul’s writings, but neither is there any clear evidence that pre-Easter Jesus tradition was an integral part of Paul’s εὐαγγέλιον. To be sure, the εὐαγγέλιον as proclaimed by all the apostles can be described in traditional terms (1 Cor. 15.1-11), but this is post-Easter apostolic tradition, not a tradition believed to have originated with the pre-resurrection life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The converse point can also be made, and perhaps more forcefully. In the few instances where Paul clearly cites or possibly alludes to traditions he believed to have originated with the historical Jesus, the terminology of εὐαγγέλιον is never used to refer to the tradition itself.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in one of these instances the terminology used to refer to the tradition (ὁ κύριος διέταξεν) is clearly to be distinguished from the ‘proclamation of the gospel’ (τοῖς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον καταγγέλλουσιν ἐκ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ζῆν) as the content of the tradition (1 Cor. 9.14). Paul believed the Jesus tradition included comment on the proclamation of the gospel, but apparently for Paul the proclamation of the gospel did not of necessity include Jesus tradition.

For Paul, the εὐαγγέλιον is the orally proclaimed<sup>10</sup> salvific message about Jesus centred on his death and resurrection; it is, as M. Hengel describes, ‘the living “message of salvation”, preached orally and with a christological stamp’ (Hengel 2000: 61). This can be expressed in summary form, even as apostolic tradition to which all the apostles could adhere:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the

8. On this subject, see Kittel 1967 [1942]. Schniewind (1910) also addresses the subject of this article, but up to this point I have not been able to access it.

9. 1 Cor. 7.10-11; 9.14; 11.23-25; cf. Rom. 14.14 and possibly 1 Thess. 4.16-17.

10. Friedrich (1964: 730) notes the abundance of verbs of speaking and hearing associated with the term in Paul. As will be seen, the emphasis on oral proclamation is also found in the use of ‘word’ language; see Kittel 1967 [1942]: 102, 119.

Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15.3-5).<sup>11</sup>

However, the full significance of the message of 'Christ crucified and risen' appears to have been a matter of individual apostolic interpretation, and Paul's interpretation, that which he calls 'my gospel', is quite rich and complex in its origin, its expression and its significance.<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is this richness and complexity of Paul's gospel which continues to fascinate Pauline scholars and fuel discussions about his theology.

Paul's use of λόγος and ῥῆμα for this salvific message is extensive and revealing.<sup>13</sup> These instances are discernible as referring to the gospel message because they are generally in contexts which describe the missionary preaching or teaching, often with εὐάγγελ- or κηρυσ- language close at hand. Not only is λόγος or ῥῆμα a common way for Paul to describe the gospel message, but the gospel message is the single most common referent of these words in Paul's writings. Of the 50 occurrences of λόγος and ῥῆμα in the undisputed Pauline writings, as many as 19 refer to the salvific message about Jesus.<sup>14</sup> By comparison, the next most common use of these terms is in idiomatic expressions emphasizing 'oral speech' in comparison to other modes of communication or action, roughly nine times in total.<sup>15</sup> The remaining occurrences refer a few times to Scriptural 'commands' or 'promises',<sup>16</sup> or to more generic referents such as 'matters' or 'accounts' or literal 'words'. Thus, to put this another way, the only

11. Other summaries are found in creed-like formulations such as Rom. 1.2-4 or 10.9-10, or even in pithy slogans such as 'Christ crucified' (1 Cor. 1.23) or the frequent 'Jesus died and rose' (e.g. 1 Thess. 4.14). On the rhetorical use of these abbreviations of the full message, see Mitchell 1994.

12. See especially the development of this 'gospel' theme in Romans, with 1.16-17 as the *propositio* of the letter. It is in this letter that Paul uses the phrase 'my gospel' (Rom. 2.16; 16.25; but cf. 2 Cor. 4.3; Gal. 1.11; 1 Thess. 1.5).

13. Rom. 10.8, 17; 1 Cor. 1.18; 2.4; 14.36; 15.2; 2 Cor. 1.18; 2.17; 4.2; 5.19; 6.7; Gal. 6.6; Phil. 1.14; 2.16; 1 Thess. 1.8; 2.13; 4.15; cf. Eph. 1.13; 5.26; 6.17; Col. 1.5, 25; 3.16; 2 Thess. 3.1; 2 Tim. 2.9, 15; 4.2; Tit. 1.3, 9; 2.5. For specific analysis, see below.

14. Within the undisputed Pauline epistles, approximately 15 out of 44 occurrences of λόγος and 3 out of 6 occurrences of ῥῆμα refer to the gospel message. Within the disputed Pauline epistles of Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, the numbers are 6 of 16 and 1 of 2; within the Pastoral Epistles, they are 6 of 20 for λόγος, and ῥῆμα is not found.

15. Rom. 15.18; 1 Cor. 1.5; 2.1; 4.19, 20; 10.10; 11.6; 1 Thess. 1.5; 2.5. On ἐν λόγῳ ἀληθείας in 2 Cor. 6.7, see n. 20.

16. Rom. 9.9; 13.9; 1 Cor. 15.54; Gal. 5.14.

‘divine speech sources’ for which Paul uses singular λόγος or ῥῆμα are the gospel message (frequently) and specific Scriptural statements (occasionally)—never clearly for a saying of the historical Jesus via tradition nor for an utterance of the exalted Jesus through a Christian prophet.<sup>17</sup>

Paul can use λόγος or ῥῆμα by itself in reference to the gospel message,<sup>18</sup> but more often this use is found with a qualifying genitive. The use of these as ‘word of the Lord’ or ‘word of God’ almost always refers to this salvific message about Jesus.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in the Pauline letters almost every instance of λόγος or ῥῆμα with any sort of theologically significant qualifying genitive can be understood to refer to the salvific message about Jesus, including such expressions as ‘word of the cross’, ‘word of reconciliation’, ‘word of truth’ and ‘word of life’.<sup>20</sup> This pattern of use—‘word (of *x*)’ for the gospel message—is confined to the singular λόγος or ῥῆμα, and within this pattern the word or phrase can occur either with or without the article.<sup>21</sup> Paul’s preference in this pattern is clearly λόγος, as the only

17. Paul uses ‘command’ and ‘tradition’ language to refer to Jesus’ teachings (1 Cor. 7.10-11, 25; 9.14; 11.23-25), and ‘revelation’ and ‘prophecy’ language to refer to prophetic utterances and experiences (e.g. 1 Cor. 14.6, 26, 30; 2 Cor. 12.1; Gal. 2.2; 1 Thess. 5.20). The use of ‘word of the Lord’ in 1 Thess. 4.15 is notoriously ambiguous, and the present study may in fact go some way to solving the enigma of that phrase, as a reference to the salvific message about Jesus.

18. 1 Cor. 2.4; 15.2; 2 Cor. 1.18; Gal. 6.6; Phil. 1.14; cf. Eph. 5.26; 2 Tim. 4.2; Tit. 1.3, 9. Phil. 1.14 has τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ in some significant manuscripts (e.g.  $\aleph$ , A, B); a few have κυρίου instead of τοῦ θεοῦ; τὸν λόγον by itself is represented in P<sup>46</sup>, among others.

19. 1 Cor. 14.36; 2 Cor. 2.17; 4.2; 1 Thess. 1.8; 2.13; cf. Eph. 6.17; Col. 1.25; 2 Thess. 3.1; 2 Tim. 2.9; Tit. 2.5. Several manuscripts have ῥήματος θεοῦ in Rom. 10.17, but ῥήματος Χριστοῦ appears to be the better reading (found in P<sup>46</sup>,  $\aleph$ ). Only one instance of ‘word of God’ in the undisputed Pauline letters is not used in this way (Rom. 9.6). On ‘word of the Lord’ in 1 Thess. 4.15, see n. 17.

20. The previous plus Rom. 10.8, 17; 1 Cor. 1.18; 2 Cor. 5.19; 6.7; Phil. 2.16; cf. Col. 1.5; 3.16; Eph. 1.13; 2 Tim. 2.15. P<sup>46</sup> has τὸ εὐαγγέλιον instead of τὸν λόγον in 2 Cor. 5.19, and some manuscripts combine the two words; τὸν λόγον by itself is found in P<sup>34</sup> and  $\aleph$ , among others. The use of ἐν λόγῳ ἀληθείας in 2 Cor. 6.7 could simply be ‘in truthful speech’, but given the contextual emphasis on the gospel proclamation and presence here of the common Pauline juxtaposition of gospel and divine power (e.g. Rom. 1.16-17; 1 Cor. 1.17-18; 1 Thess. 1.5), it may be preferable to see this as ‘with the word of truth’, i.e. the gospel message.

21. With the article: Rom. 10.8; 1 Cor. 1.18; 2.4; 14.36; 2 Cor. 1.18; 2.17; 4.2; 5.19; Gal. 6.6; Phil. 1.14; 1 Thess. 1.8; cf. Eph. 1.13; Col. 1.5, 25; 3.16; 2 Thess. 3.1; 2 Tim. 2.9, 15; 4.2; Tit. 1.3, 9; 2.5. Without the article: Rom. 10.17; 1 Cor. 15.2; 2 Cor. 6.7; Phil. 2.16; 1 Thess. 2.13; cf. Eph. 5.26; 6.17.

instance of ῥῆμα for the gospel message in the undisputed Pauline letters is driven by Paul's desire to conform to a scriptural citation (Rom. 10.8, 17).

Stanton rightly notes that 'word' language as synonymous with εὐαγγέλιον is not confined to Paul but also occurs in other early Christian writings. In fact, examples of this synonymy can be found in most of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter and Revelation<sup>22</sup>—as well as in the early Apostolic Fathers—Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp and others.<sup>23</sup> In many of these instances, the use follows the full 'word of *x*' pattern noted above, including the use of 'word of the Lord' or 'word of God'. Furthermore, apart from the occasional use for Scripture and the same idiomatic expressions and mundane uses as noted above in Paul's writings, the singular 'word' is generally reserved for this 'gospel' synonymy in the early Christian writings. More specifically, outside of the Gospels and Acts the singular λόγος or ῥῆμα is never used for a particular saying of the historical Jesus via tradition, and in none of this literature is it ever used for an utterance of the exalted Jesus through a Christian prophet.<sup>24</sup> Even more to the point, the notable phrase λόγος κυρίου is only clearly used in synonymy with εὐαγγέλιον.

As noted above, in the Pauline writings both εὐαγγέλιον and the 'word (of *x*)' pattern refer exclusively to the orally proclaimed salvific message about Jesus centred on his death and resurrection. However, in these later writings the 'word' pattern can evidently include Jesus tradition or apostolic teachings,<sup>25</sup> as Stanton and others have noted with the use of εὐαγγέλιον. Nevertheless, this later use is still subject to the qualifications noted above, particularly that, while λόγος κυρίου may refer to a complex of ideas which includes Jesus tradition, the phrase is never used to refer to a *particular* saying, discourse or teaching of the historical Jesus via tradition.<sup>26</sup>

22. Clear or possible uses of this synonymy include Mt. 13.19-23; 15.6; Mk 2.2; 4.14-17, 18-20, 33; 7.13; Lk. 5.1; 8.11-13, 15, 21; 11.28; Heb. 4.12; 6.5; 13.7; 1 Pet. 1.23, 25; 2.8; 3.1; Jas 1.18, 21; Rev. 1.9; 6.9; 20.4. For this use in Acts, see below.

23. Clear or possible uses of this synonymy include *1 Clem.* 42.3; *Ign. Eph.* 15.2; *Phil.* 11.1; *Smyrn.* prescript; 10.1; *Did.* 4.1; *Pol. Phil.* 3.2; 7.2; 9.1; *Barn.* 6.17; 9.3; 10.11; 16.9; 19.4, 9, 10; *Herm.* 11.5; 15.3, 6; 102.2.

24. The use of singular 'word' for a saying of the historical Jesus is found in Mt. 19.11, 22; 26.44, 75; Mk 10.22; 14.39, 72; Lk. 22.61; Jn 2.22; 7.36; 15.20; 18.9, 32; Acts 11.16. The phrase ῥῆμα θεοῦ is used once in a prophetic call formula for John the Baptist (Lk. 3.2).

25. E.g. Lk. 1.2 (cf. Acts 6.4); *Pol. Phil.* 7.2.

26. In the scholarly literature one frequently sees a phrase such as 'a word of the

In the use of this ‘word’ pattern, the book of Acts stands above the rest. Here one sees ‘word’ language repeatedly, almost overwhelmingly, in reference to the salvific message about Jesus proclaimed by the early Christian witnesses.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, whereas Paul’s preferred term for this message is εὐαγγέλιον, which occurs almost three times as often as the ‘word’ pattern in his undisputed letters, in Acts the ‘word’ pattern outnumbers εὐαγγέλιον by a ratio of almost twenty to one. The pattern in Acts occurs most frequently as ‘word of the Lord’ or ‘word of God’.<sup>28</sup> There are, in fact, no clear instances in Acts of λόγος θεοῦ or λόγος κυρίου as anything other than a synonym of εὐαγγέλιον, though the phrase ῥῆμα κυρίου is used once of a saying of Jesus (11.16), and the plural λόγοι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ is also used once in this way (20.35). Furthermore, the full ‘word of *x*’ pattern in reference to the gospel message is also seen in other theologically significant genitival constructions such as ‘word of grace’ (14.3; 20.32) and ‘word of salvation’ (13.26), even explicitly as ‘word of the gospel’ (15.7). Intriguingly, nearly two-thirds of the total occurrences of ‘word’ for the gospel message, including roughly three-quarters of the occurrences of ‘word of *x*’, are found in chs. 13–20, where the narrative focuses on the Pauline mission and proclamation.

Thus, a discernible ‘word’ pattern as synonymous with the ‘gospel’ is strongly represented in the early Christian writings, indeed as a ‘characteristic feature of early Christian terminology’ (Kittel 1967 [1942]: 109), although in most of these writings this use is much less extensive and somewhat less exclusive than in Acts or the Pauline writings.

Lord’ used as an equivalent expression to ‘a saying of Jesus’ from the Jesus tradition. Particularly egregious examples of this can be found, in which the Greek phrase λόγος κυρίου is employed as if it were the common way of referring to the Jesus tradition in the earliest Christian writings (e.g. Hengel 2000: 62). However, such a casual, quasi-technical use of ‘word of the Lord’ or λόγος κυρίου in the secondary literature is unwarranted and can be misleading.

27. Acts 2.41; 4.4, 29, 31; 6.2, 4, 7; 8.4, 14, 25; 10.36, 44; 11.1, 19; 12.24; 13.5, 7, 15, 26, 44, 46, 48, 49; 14.3, 25; 15.7, 35, 36; 16.6, 32; 17.11, 13; 18.5, 11; 19.10, 20; 20.32.

28. ‘Word of the Lord’: Acts 8.25; 13.44, 48, 49; 15.35, 36; 16.32; 19.10. ‘Word of God’: Acts 4.31; 6.2, 7; 8.14; 11.1; 12.24; 13.5, 7, 46; 17.13; 18.11. That these phrases are interchangeable in Acts is demonstrated primarily by their synonymy as the gospel message (e.g. their use in Acts 13), and secondarily by the textual tradition for several of these passages in which both alternatives are witnessed.



*The Origins of the 'Word' as 'Gospel' Pattern*

As noted above, Stanton and others have offered a plausible general explanation of the origin of εὐαγγέλιον within early Christianity. The use of the term owes its general background to the biblical 'good news' of God's saving sovereignty for his exiled people in Isaiah (possibly influenced by Jesus' own use of this motif), its immediate function as an alternative to the 'good news' of imperial propaganda in the first century CE, and its essential content to the recent events of Jesus' death and resurrection as subjected to apostolic interpretation.

But what is the origin of this 'word' language in reference to this gospel message? Surely to some extent it can simply be attributed to the general use of λόγος and ῥῆμα as 'message', particularly emphasizing the oral delivery of the message (LSJ: 901-902; BDAG: 598-601; Kittel 1967 [1942]: 102). The gospel was certainly a 'message', a particular cluster of ideas rather than a single statement in a necessary form, and it was, as far as we know, almost exclusively orally delivered in the first decades of Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it would be natural for the early Christians to use the term λόγος or ῥῆμα to describe their orally proclaimed 'message'. This may explain the general use of this language among early Christians, and may even to a certain degree explain the use in the inherited Jesus tradition to refer to Jesus' kingdom 'message'. But can more be said about this? In particular, what accounts for the prevalent use by Paul and the overwhelming use in Acts, especially in recounting the Pauline mission?

One possibility lies in Jewish perspectives on the Mosaic Law, which could be described using 'word' language, even as 'word of God' or 'word of the Lord'.<sup>30</sup> With regard to Acts, Isa. 2.3 (cf. Mic. 4.2) may have been a significant part of the background to the author's agenda. The Isaianic oracle tells of 'the days to come', at a time of eschatological fulfilment, when the nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord, and 'out of Zion shall go forth the Law (LXX νόμος), and the word of the Lord (λόγος κυρίου) from Jerusalem'. Indeed, for Acts this can be seen as programmatic: at this time of eschatological fulfilment in view of the recent life, death and resurrection of the Messiah, the 'word of the Lord', the gospel

29. Neither the possible use of notebooks by early Christian itinerant teachers nor the explication of the gospel message in early Christian letters negates this claim, as both would have been understood as supporting or supplementing the primarily oral proclamation. On the possible use of such notebooks, see Stanton 2004: 181-89.

30. As 'word', e.g. Deut. 30.14; Ps. 119.43 (LXX 118.43). With θεοῦ, e.g. 1 Chron. 15.15; Ezra 9.4. With κυρίου, e.g. 2 Chron. 35.6.

message, must now go forth from Jerusalem. Acts 1.8 could even be seen as a sort of conflation of Isa. 2.3 and 49.6, tying together the eschatological pronouncement of the word of the Lord ‘from Jerusalem’ with the Isaianic ‘servant’ commission to be a light to the nations, bringing God’s salvation ‘to the ends of the earth’.

With regard to Paul, it is significant that in the one place where Paul’s gospel ‘word’ language explicitly betrays a source, it is in a quotation which originally referred to the Mosaic Law. In Rom. 10.8 Paul takes the description of the Law in Deut. 30.14 as a ‘word’ (LXX ῥῆμα) which has been brought near and is capable of human response, and applies this description *a fortiori* to the gospel message. This is simply one example of a broad pattern in Paul, in which the Law points forward to, prepares for, and is caught up in Christ and the salvific message about him.<sup>31</sup> Thus, both Paul and Acts seem to bear witness to the gospel message as a ‘new Torah’, the eschatological ‘Law’ of Christ and God’s saving action through him.

This may seem to settle the issue of the origin of this ‘word’ language. However, by itself this description is inadequate, for it fails to account for the primary and predominant referent of ‘word’ language in the Jewish scriptures.

In these scriptures, within narrative descriptions of prophetic revelation and within the prophetic literature itself, the phrases ‘word of the Lord’ and ‘word of God’ are used frequently for a given prophetic oracle in particular or occasionally of the prophetic call generally (see Kittel 1967 [1942]: 94-98). As with the ‘word as gospel’ pattern noted above, these phrases in the Septuagint can be found with either λόγος or ῥῆμα in either articular or anarthrous versions,<sup>32</sup> and ‘word’ can be used alone in this regard.<sup>33</sup> This biblical ‘word of God/the Lord’ pattern is so prominent that it is unimaginable that any Jew in the first century nurtured on the scriptures could say or hear these phrases without hearing echoes of the previous prophetic usage. In fact, such usage of ‘word of God/the Lord’ for

31. Rom. 7.1-6; 10.4; Gal. 3.19-4.7.

32. As ὁ λόγος κυρίου, e.g. 1 Sam. 15.24; 1 Chron. 11.3; Isa. 39.5; Jer. 8.9; Amos 5.1; Zech. 4.6. As τὸ ῥῆμα κυρίου, e.g. Josh. 3.9; 1 Sam. 8.10; Isa. 66.5; Jer. 6.10. As τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦ θεοῦ, e.g. Jer. 1.1. As λόγος κυρίου, e.g. 2 Sam. 24.11; 1 Chron. 17.3; Ezra 1.1; Isa. 1.10; Jer. 1.4; Ezek. 1.3; Dan. 9.2; Hos. 1.1; Joel 1.1; Amos 7.16; Jon. 1.1; Mic. 1.1; Zeph. 1.1; Hagg. 1.1; Zech. 1.1; Mal. 1.1. As λόγος θεοῦ e.g. Judg. 3.20; Jer. 9.19. As ῥῆμα κυρίου, e.g. Gen. 15.1; 1 Sam. 3.1; 2 Chron. 36.22. As ῥῆμα θεοῦ, e.g. 1 Sam. 9.27.

33. E.g. Num. 22.20; Deut. 18.21; Isa. 15.1; Jer. 18.18; 22.1, 4; Amos 4.1.

prophetic utterance was still in use in non-Christian Jewish circles,<sup>34</sup> even as it seems to be almost entirely absent from the vocabulary of the early Christians, even Jewish Christians. This extraordinary shift in referent of such a prominent pattern calls for explanation.

Thus, there seem to be two possible antecedents for the early Christian use of 'word' as gospel: the biblical use of 'word' language for the Mosaic Law, and the biblical use of 'word' language for prophetic revelation. The first is explicitly found in Paul and plausibly demonstrated in Acts; the second is so prominent in the biblical background that it is difficult to imagine any of the earliest Christians being unaware of it or uninfluenced by it. Can these two antecedents be accounted for in a coherent explanation of the origins of this Christian 'word' language?

For Paul, the keys to this are found in his eschatological perspective and his prophetic self-understanding. As to the former, Paul viewed himself and his churches as standing at the culmination of human history, at the beginning of the eschaton.<sup>35</sup> The Messiah has arrived, the resurrection has been initiated, God's people are vindicated, and the new creation is here.<sup>36</sup> All prior prophetic promises are fulfilled in Christ, and the scriptures bear witness to the core events of the gospel.<sup>37</sup> Christ and the eschatological Spirit now take the place of the Law and its righteous demands in defining the people of God.<sup>38</sup>

The gospel 'word' as Law and as prophetic revelation is brought together within this eschatological outlook. It is because of this perspective that Paul can speak *a fortiori* in Rom. 10, that, if the Law-'word' can be described as 'near' and able to be responded to adequately, then surely the gospel-'word' can be described in this way. In fact, Paul may have seen the essence of the Law-'word' as equivalent to the gospel-'word' (as Hays 1989: 81-82). It is also this eschatological perspective which would have encouraged the use of prophetic language in describing the salvific message about Jesus: all prior prophetic 'words' find their fulfilment in this unique 'word', and it is this 'word' which is the ultimate, universal divine message for all people.

A related reason for Paul's use of this 'word' language is found in his

34. E.g. *1 En.* 67.1; *2 Bar.* 1.1; 10.1; cf. *4 Ezra* 6.15.

35. *1 Cor.* 10.11; *Gal.* 4.4.

36. *Rom.* 3.21-24; *1 Cor.* 15.20-23; *2 Cor.* 5.17; *Gal.* 2.16; 6.15.

37. *Rom.* 3.21; *1 Cor.* 15.3-4; *2 Cor.* 1.19-20.

38. *Rom.* 3.21-31; 7.6; 8.1-18; 10.4; *Gal.* 2.15-16; 3.24-27; 5.18; *Phil.* 3.4-11. For an extensive treatment of the possible range of Paul's eschatological perspective, see Beker 1980.

prophetic self-understanding, a crucial component in his thought (Munck 1959: 24-33; Stendahl 1976: 7-11). This is not primarily his self-understanding as a Christian prophet having the prophetic *charisma*,<sup>39</sup> which seems to have been relatively marginal in his estimation of himself.<sup>40</sup> Rather more important for this prophetic self-understanding was Paul's perspective on his apostolic call and mission in the terms and categories of the Hebrew prophets, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah. Paul believed himself to be specially set apart before he was born, commissioned through a decisive revelatory experience, and compelled to proclaim the Lord's 'word' to the nations.<sup>41</sup>

Herein lies a more personal key for unlocking Paul's characteristic use of the 'word of *x*' pattern for the gospel message, especially evident in his uses of the distinctive prophetic phrases 'word of the Lord' and 'word of God'. Paul appears to have intentionally employed the prophetic phrase 'word of God/the Lord', but used this and related phrases in reference to the ultimate 'word of God/the Lord', the salvific message about Jesus, and not to any ordinary prophetic revelation.<sup>42</sup> He viewed not only his apostolic call and mission in prophetic categories, but also his apostolic message: he was specially called to proclaim the 'word of the Lord', the message about the Lord's saving sovereignty, 'proclaiming the good news' about the Lord Jesus as a light to the nations. For Paul this salvific message about Jesus was as much or more a matter of direct revelation to him at his call as it was an inherited tradition.<sup>43</sup> His particular spin on the gospel message was in a personal sense a direct prophetic revelation—*his* gospel—not one out of many similar prophetic revelations but rather a unique revelation, the revelation *par excellence*.

The author of Acts shared the same general eschatological perspectives

39. 1 Cor. 14.6; cf. Acts 13.1.

40. In 2 Cor. 12 Paul has to reach back 14 years to find a suitable example of a personal direct revelation, and even then he demonstrates great reluctance in describing this experience. He downplayed his prophetic *charisma* and experience due to the tendency of others to emphasize them unduly. See also below on Paul's perspective on the relative authority and significance of the prophetic *charisma* and the apostolic commission.

41. Rom. 1.1, 5, 13-14; 10.15; 15.18-21; 1 Cor. 1.1; 9.16; Gal. 1.1, 12, 15-16; cf. Isa. 6; 49.5-6; 52.7, 15; Jer. 1.4-10; 20.9; Ezek. 1.1-2.8; Amos 3.8.

42. In discussing Jeremiah's 'word' theology as expressed in Jer. 23.28-29, Kittel (1967 [1942]: 98) notes that Jeremiah shows a 'self-differentiation from ordinary prophecy', distinguishing between the 'visions' of a regular prophet and the one who has God's 'word'.

43. Gal. 1.11-16; cf. 1 Cor. 15.1-11.

on the salvific message about Jesus, demonstrating adherence to the notion that the Christ events and the gospel message are the fulfilment of Scripture.<sup>44</sup> The programmatic oracle of Isa. 2.3 is itself a prophetic 'word' (Isa. 2.1), and it is because of Luke's eschatological perspective that he sees the fulfilment of this prophetic 'word' in the proclamation of the gospel message, with the nations streaming to Jerusalem at Pentecost and the ultimate 'word of the Lord' going forth from Jerusalem to the nations.

In general terms, the author of Acts also shared Paul's prophetic self-understanding, although in Acts this is applied to the Twelve and to Paul in narrative fashion. The Twelve and Paul are the primary spokespersons for God, both in external witness and in internal instruction of the gospel message.<sup>45</sup> In view of this, the Pentecostal pronouncement that all Christians will prophesy (Acts 2.17) is not taken to mean that all Christians are equally authoritative as God's spokespersons. In this, the author seems to have had a similar perspective to Paul's: the prophetic *charisma* addresses personal or practical needs for the edification of the church,<sup>46</sup> but the apostles stand as the true heirs of the biblical prophets in terms of authority and mission.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, one can see just as clearly as in Paul's writings the connection between Paul's particular commission and the commission of the biblical prophets, especially that of the Isaianic 'servant'.<sup>48</sup>

It is well recognized that the author of Acts demonstrates familiarity with the basic contours and many details of Paul's life and thought, even if it is deemed unlikely that he had a direct acquaintance with Paul's letters.<sup>49</sup> Thus, these similarities with the Pauline eschatological and prophetic perspective may point to some sort of Lukan dependence on Paul. Furthermore, the preponderance of 'word' language for the gospel message in the narrative of the Pauline mission in Acts 13–20 is perhaps best explained as a residue of the author's familiarity with Pauline usage. Thus, Acts employs the prophetic 'word' language for the gospel message

44. Acts 2.31; 4.25–28; 8.32–35; 10.43; 13.27–37; 26.22–23; cf. Lk. 1.1; 24.27.

45. E.g. Acts 2.42; 6.2–4; 20.24; 26.16–18.

46. Acts 11.28–30; 21.10–14; 1 Cor. 14.3, 24–25.

47. Note the apparent subordination of prophets and prophetic utterance to apostolic authority and mission in Acts 21.4 and 1 Cor. 14.37 (cf. 12.28). Furthermore, while Paul calls on prophetic revelations to be tested (1 Cor. 14.29; 1 Thess. 5.20–21)—an unthinkable proposition for one of the biblical prophets such as Isaiah or Jeremiah—he expects his apostolic injunctions to be obeyed.

48. Acts 9.15–17; 26.12–18; cf. Isa. 42.6–7; 49.6; 51.4; 51.1; Jer. 1.7–8, 10.

49. This is so even for those who have a negative assessment of Luke's comprehension of Paul's thought, e.g. Barrett 1998. For a more positive, recent assessment of the reliability of Luke's presentation of Paul, see Witherington 1998.

out of familiarity with the Pauline usage and affinity with the Pauline perspective. Indeed, given the even greater prominence of this usage in Acts, the author of Acts seems to have accentuated the pattern of the one he so admired.<sup>50</sup>

Recognizing the prophetic background to the 'word' and 'gospel' language of Paul and Acts helps to explain some distinctive features of these texts. One is the Pauline use of ἀποκάλυψις and μυστήριον in reference to the proclaimed gospel message.<sup>51</sup> These two terms are found in Jewish and Christian writings with reference to prophetic revelation, including several noteworthy instances in Daniel in juxtaposition with each other.<sup>52</sup> That Paul viewed the proclamation of the salvific message about Jesus as the prophetic delivery of the ultimate prophetic 'word' explains his appropriation of this language to describe the gospel. Another common Pauline and Lukan feature is explained in this reconstruction as well: their connection of the 'gospel' or the 'word' with divine power and life. Isaiah and Jeremiah in particular, with their more developed 'word' theologies, describe the prophetic word from God as possessing power and producing life. God's 'word' is like the rain which brings forth life from the earth, necessarily accomplishing the divine purpose (Isa. 55.10-11); God watches over it carefully, to bring it to fruition (Jer. 1.12).<sup>53</sup> Paul and Luke, drawing on this perspective on the prophetic word, likewise see the ultimate prophetic word, the gospel message, as possessing power and producing life. Thus, Luke can describe the 'word' increasing and spreading as if it were a living thing,<sup>54</sup> and Paul can emphasize the divine power and presence of the Spirit that accompanies the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>55</sup>

But what of other Christian literature? As noted above, it is likely that the general use of 'word' language for the Christian message simply draws on the common use of λόγος or ῥῆμα to mean 'message'. The proportionately fewer uses of this 'word' pattern outside of Paul and Acts may be explained in this way.

50. Hengel (2000: 99) notes that Luke 'shows that he too wants to be a "theologian of the word"; one might almost describe this predilection for the proclaimed word of the message of salvation as a "Pauline" trait'.

51. ἀποκάλυψις: Rom. 1.17; 16.25; 1 Cor. 2.10; Gal. 3.23. μυστήριον: Rom. 16.25; 1 Cor. 2.1 (in P<sup>vid</sup>, 8, A, C'); 2.7; 4.1; cf. Eph. 6.19; Col. 4.3; 1 Tim. 3.9, 16.

52. E.g. Num. 22.31; 1 Sam. 3.7; Dan. 2.18, 19, 22, 27-30, 47; 4.9; 10.1; Amos 3.7; Sir. 42.19; 1 Cor. 13.2; 14.6, 26, 30; 2 Cor. 12.1, 7; Gal. 2.2; *Did.* 11.11; Herm. 11.2-4.

53. Cf. Isa. 40.8; 45.23; Jer. 5.13-14; 23.28-29.

54. Acts 6.7; 12.24; 13.49; 19.20.

55. Rom. 1.16-17; 1 Cor. 1.17-18; 1 Thess. 1.5.

However, although this 'word' pattern is not employed as frequently or as clearly outside of Paul and Acts, it is surely significant that 'word of the Lord' and 'word of God' were not used by the early Christians to refer to prophetic utterance, even though this would have been the most natural of uses given the prominence of this use in their scriptures. This fact is puzzling, but it may possibly be explained by the greater prominence of contemporary use as a synonym of the 'gospel'. Gerhard Kittel sums up this remarkable state of affairs:

[A]fter the coming of Jesus the Word of God or the Word of the Lord has for the whole of primitive Christianity a new and absolutely exclusive sense. It has become the undisputed term for the one Word of God which God has spoken, and speaks, in what has taken place in Jesus and in the message concerning it. From this time on, the term cannot be used of any other revealing event, no matter how authentic and estimable in the religious sense (1967 [1942]: 113).

Kittel has allowed his rhetoric to run too far—these phrases can occasionally have other referents—but the basic gist of his statement is surely correct.

While in some cases this early Christian synonymy of 'word' and 'gospel' may have been initially prompted by Paul's use, the links are less clear than those in Acts.<sup>56</sup> It is perhaps at least as likely that others independently made the connection between the prophetic 'word' and the gospel 'word', seeing the latter as the ultimate fulfilment of the former. Certainly the eschatological perspective which saw Christ and the gospel as the fulfilment of prophecy at the edge of the eschaton was not a uniquely Pauline one, and could also have led others down this same path.

### *Conclusion*

The early Christian use of 'word' language in reference to the gospel thus finds its origins in the 'word' language of the Jewish scriptures, particularly that of the biblical prophets, acquired through the eschatological self-understanding of the early Christians in general and the prophetic self-understanding of Paul in particular. It was appropriate for one who regarded himself as standing in the line of the biblical prophets to use prophetic 'word' language to refer to his own message, just as it was appropriate for those who regarded their message as fulfilling the expectations

56. Given their affinities with or apparent knowledge of Pauline thought, those with possibly direct links to Paul's usage include Mark, Hebrews, James and 1 Peter.

of the prophets to refer to this message as the ultimate prophetic ‘word’.

Several theological and social forces were at work among the early Christians, shaping the whole spectrum of language used to describe their distinctive message. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the scriptures and their perceived prophetic function, the self-understanding of Jesus and the apostles, and the pressures of living and proselytizing as an emerging, distinctive minority in Roman society—all these factors contributed to the early Christian use of the word ‘gospel’, and the description of the gospel as ‘word’.

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