

For Keith Sutton

WHAT SAINT PAUL REALLY SAID

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WAS PAUL OF TARSUS
THE REAL FOUNDER
OF CHRISTIANITY?

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CHAPTER 3

Herald of the King

We find it quite easy to separate 'conversion' from 'vocation'. The first refers to one's own experience: an inner turning or process of being turned, a deep change at the core of one's being. The second refers to one's work, what one does in public, the direction of one's outward activity. In the modern Western world it is not difficult to imagine someone being 'converted', as an inner religious experience, without a major change taking place in their 'vocation'. A non-Christian bank manager who becomes a Christian may behave differently, but will not necessarily abandon his or her original calling.

For Paul, conversion and vocation were so closely identified that it would be hard even for a razor-sharp mind like his to get a blade in between them. The manner of his conversion — stopped literally in his tracks in the hot, 'zealous' pursuit of traitors, discovering that the crucified would-be Messiah Jesus had been vindicated by God — confronted him at every level. All the things that we must suppose went on, as we would say, inside him, were matched by the total change of direction to which he was called in his outward, public life.

What never changed — this is most important to grasp once and for all — was his utter and unswerving loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who made promises to Abraham, the God who gave the law, the God who spoke through the prophets. This is, of course, as controversial in current writing about Paul as it was when Paul made the same claim, as he did many times over; we shall discuss it more fully in due course. The point is that, despite what many have thought, he did not (as it were) abandon Judaism for something else. Here he, and we, are in a dleft stick. If he had abandoned Judaism and invented a new religion, he would be regarded by many as anti-Jewish. If he had claimed that Judaism's long story had reached its climax, its fulfilment, in Jesus of Nazareth, he would be regarded by

many as anti-Jewish. Heads I lose; tails you win. I think he took the second route. Those who object to this on principle need to face the question, whether they would really have preferred him to take the first.

The problem, of course, is that Paul's new vocation involved him not so much in the enjoyment and propagation of a new religious experience, as in the announcement of what he saw as a public fact: that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead by Israel's God; that he had thereby been vindicated as Israel's Messiah; that, surprising though it might seem, he was therefore the Lord of the whole world. Paul's vocation was to tell this story; the true story of Israel's God and his people, the true story (in consequence) of the creator and the cosmos. And his calling was to tell it to the whole world. Nor was he simply, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, to go around making people sadder and wiser by telling them a long, rambling tale that said far more about the teller than the hearers. He was to go into all the world as a herald of the king.

He was, in other words – as he says several times – 'entrusted with the gospel'. But what precisely did he mean by 'the gospel'? This question takes us to the very heart of what he really said, and we must step back for a moment and look at the question quite carefully.

Misunderstanding 'Gospel' in the Modern Church

The word 'gospel', like Paul himself, has had a chequered career in the course of Christian history. During the first century, it could refer both to a message proclaimed by word of mouth and to a book about Jesus of Nazareth. In more recent times it has been used to denote a particular sort of religious meeting (a 'gospel rally'), and as a metaphor or for utterly reliable information ('gospel truth'). Many Christians today, when reading the New Testament, never question what the word means, but assume that, since they know from their own context what they mean by 'the gospel', Paul and the others must have meant exactly the same thing. Everybody who knows anything about the word knows that it means 'good news'; but what sort of good news?

The word 'gospel' and the phrase 'the gospel' have come to denote, especially in certain circles within the church, something that in older

theology would be called an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation. 'The gospel' is supposed to be a description of how people get saved; of the theological mechanism whereby, in some people's language, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness; in other people's language, Jesus becomes my personal saviour; in other languages again, I admit my sin, believe that he died for me, and commit my life to him. In many church circles, if you hear something like that, people will say that 'the gospel' has been preached. Conversely, if you hear a sermon in which the claims of Jesus Christ are related to the political or ecological questions of the day, some people will say that, well, perhaps the subject was interesting, but 'the gospel' wasn't preached.

The trouble is, of course, that though there are obviously difficult concepts in the New Testament, which send any intelligent reader off to the commentaries and dictionaries, there are others which are in fact equally difficult but which are not recognized as such. If we continue to use a word that we find in the New Testament in a sense which the New Testament itself doesn't support, that is our responsibility. But if we then seek support for our ideas by consulting a passage where the word occurs, we are locking ourselves in to misunderstanding the text in question, and locking ourselves out from the possibility of ever really understanding what the text actually does say.

In the present case, I am perfectly comfortable with what people normally mean when they say 'the gospel'. I just don't think it is what Paul means. In other words, I am not denying that the usual meanings are things that people ought to say, to preach about, to believe. I simply wouldn't use the word 'gospel' to denote those things.

Why not? Well, to begin with, what did 'the gospel' mean in Paul's world? Presumably his meaning cannot have been a completely private one, unrelated to what everyone else meant by the word.

Backgrounds to Paul's Usage

In order to answer this question, we must unpack it a bit. Where did the idea come from, and what echoes did the word in consequence carry both for Paul and for his readers? There have been two regular answers to this double question; Paul, after all, lived in more than one world (the Jewish, the Greek, the Roman, and so forth). I suggest that these two answers have

been wrongly played off against one another, and that when we examine them both more closely we will discover that they actually belong closely together. We are here near the cutting edge of two of the central questions which, as we saw, have exercised writers on Paul for many years: how do we locate him historically, and what is the centre of his theology?

The two backgrounds regularly proposed for Paul's use of the Greek word *euangelion* ('gospel') and *euangelizesthai* ('to preach the gospel') are, predictably, the Hebrew scriptures on the one hand and pagan (Greco-Roman) usage on the other. The line between the two tends to follow the old divide between those who suppose Paul to be basically a Jewish thinker and those who see him as having borrowed his fundamental ideas from Hellenism. The evidence has been rehearsed often enough, though it is my impression that the right lessons have not always been learned from it. We must set out the main features briefly.

The Jewish usage of the relevant root include two well-known verses from Isaiah:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings (*ho euangelizomenos Sion*);
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings (*ho euangelizomenos Ierusalem*);
lift it up, do not fear,
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!' (40:9)

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace (*hos pedes euangelizomenou aken eirenes*),
who brings good news (*hos euangelizomenos agatha*),
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' (52:7)

These passages, in company with others (e.g. 60:6; 61:1), are among the climactic statements of the great double theme of the whole section (Isaiah 40–66): YHWH's return to Zion and enthronement, and the return of Israel herself from her exile in Babylon. They are not simply miscellaneous 'good news', a generalized message of comfort for the downcast; they are very specific to the plight of Israel in exile. That they were read as such by at

least some Jews in the second-temple period is clear from various post-biblical passages which echo or evoke them. The theme of the Isaianic herald was alive and well in the first century, as part of the great theme, which continued to be cherished by Jews at the time of Jesus and Paul (and indeed right up to our own generation): *the return of Israel from exile*. For many, if not most, Jewish writers in the second-temple period (538BC – AD70), the 'return from exile', predicted by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others, had not yet taken place. This is clear, especially, in the writings from Qumran, which make explicit use, in this context, of Isaiah's figure of the 'herald'. The 'good news' or 'glad tidings' would be the message that the long-awaited release from captivity was at hand.

For some, this evidence is quite sufficient to win the verdict: this Jewish background is the context within which the New Testament 'gospel' is to be understood. Others, however, still insist upon the non-Jewish background as the vital one. In the Greek world, as is well known among scholars, *euangelion* is a regular technical term, referring to the announcement of a great victory, or to the birth, or accession, of an emperor. (The first and third of these could of course easily be combined, if someone became emperor by means of a great military victory.) The coming of a new ruler meant the promise of peace, a new start for the world, not least at the time of Augustus, who became the first Roman emperor in 31BC following a long period of civil war. An inscription from 9BC says it all:

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere...; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him...!

Which of these backgrounds, then, is the appropriate one against which to read the New Testament evidence? Is 'the gospel', for Paul, an Isaianic word of comfort or an imperial proclamation?

I suggest that the antithesis between the two is a false one, based on the spurious either-or that has misleadingly divided New Testament studies for many years.

What matters in the study of words is actually not so much where an idea has come from, important though that is, as where it is going to. Confrontation is even more important than derivation. The problem is not merely that we now know that 'Jew' and 'Greek' in the first century did not live in watertight worlds (though this itself ought to make us wary of a strict either-or). It is, rather, that the Isaianic message always was about the enthronement of YHWH and the dethronement of pagan gods; about the victory of Israel and the fall of Babylon; about the arrival of the Servant King and the consequent coming of peace and justice. The scriptural message of Isaiah therefore pushes itself of its own accord into the world where pagan gods and rulers stake their claims and celebrate their enthronements. It will not do to distinguish, as is sometimes done, between supposedly 'sacred' uses (Isaiah) and supposedly 'secular' ones (Augustus). As far as first-century Jews were concerned, the 'secular' claims of the imperial cult were in fact profoundly 'religious'. The Roman world, moving fast towards the divinization of its emperors, would have eagerly agreed. And it was precisely against such 'religious' connotations – the boasting of pagan emperors from Babylon and Egypt, through the megalomania of Antiochus Epiphanes, and on to Imperial Rome – that the Jews of Paul's day had set their face. When their God, YHWH, acted within history to deliver his people, the spurious gods of the heathen would be defeated. If and when YHWH set up his own king as the true ruler, his true earthly representative, all other kingdoms would be confronted with their rightful overlord.

Once we grasp the historical setting of Paul's gospel, therefore, we discover something for which the abstract categories of traditional history-of-religions research has not prepared us. *The more Jewish we make Paul's 'gospel', the more it confronts directly the pretensions of the imperial cult, and indeed all other paganisms whether 'religious' or 'secular'.* It is because of Jewish monotheism that there can be 'no king but God'. In the history of ideas, and in lexicography, derivation is important; but so is confrontation. The all-embracing royal and religious claims of Caesar – or Babylon, or Persia, or Egypt, or Syria, or whoever) were directly challenged by the equally all-embracing claim of Israel's God. To announce that YHWH was king was to announce that Caesar is not. This was the 'good news' that Isaiah's herald was called upon to proclaim.

This, however, forces us back to our basic question. What did Paul himself mean by 'the gospel'? How did he put together this explosive combination of ideas, expectations and confrontations?

The Fourfold Gospel Concerning Jesus

Isaiah's message was about Israel's God becoming king – king of all the world, not just of Israel. Paul's gospel was likewise a message about the one true God, the God of Israel, and his victory over all the world. In a passage that we have every reason to suppose Paul intended to be seminal both for his greatest letter – the passage stands right at its opening – and for his understanding of God, the gospel, Jesus, and his own vocation, we read:

Paul, a servant of Messiah Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures – the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David's seed according to the flesh, and marked out as God's Son in power, according to the spirit of holiness, through the resurrection of the dead, Jesus the Messiah our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name.... (Romans 1:1-5)

God's gospel concerning his Son. A message about God – the one true God, the God who inspired the prophets – consisting in a message about Jesus. A story – a true story – about a human life, death and resurrection through which the living God becomes king of the world. A message which had grasped Paul and, through his work, would mushroom out to all the nations. That is Paul's shorthand summary of what 'the gospel' actually is.

It is not, then, a system of how people get saved. The announcement of the gospel results in people being saved – Paul says as much a few verses later. But 'the gospel' itself, strictly speaking, is the narrative proclamation of King Jesus. He can speak equally of 'announcing the gospel' and of 'announcing Jesus', using the term *kerussein*, 'to act as a herald' in each case (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:23; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 4:5; 11:4; Galatians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:9). When the herald makes a royal proclamation, he says 'Nero (or whoever) has become emperor.' He does not say 'If you would like to have an experience of living under an emperor, you might care to try Nero.' The proclamation is an authoritative summons to obedience – in Paul's case, to what he calls 'the obedience of faith'.

We shall come to 'faith' in due course. For the moment, we must concentrate on the actual content of the story which formed the

announcement made by Paul, the herald, to the world. The story of God and the world, he believed, was focused on and encapsulated within the story of Jesus of Nazareth. This story was 'gospel', good news, for all the world. I want now to outline, step by step, the core of the story as far as Paul was concerned. His announcement was that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel's Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world. Or, to put it yet more compactly: Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord.

The crucified Jesus

It is an obvious truism to say that the cross stands at the heart of Paul's whole theology. (It is, however, revealing to see how several treatments of Paul, both at the most serious and at the more popular levels, fail to treat it as central.) The problem for anyone who attempts to think Paul's thoughts after him is that each time he mentions the cross — as he does literally dozens of times, on almost every page of his letters — he says something different about it. How has God fulfilled the promises to Abraham? Through the cross. What is at stake if unthinking ex-pagans eat meat offered to idols? They may offend a brother or sister 'for whom Christ died'. What happens in baptism? People die with Christ. How did God overthrow the rule of the evil powers? The cross was his triumphal procession. What is the supreme revelation of God's love, and hence of his unshakable commitment to his people and his world? The death of Jesus. How are Jew and Gentile reconciled? Through the cross. Why are Christians no longer 'under the law'? Because 'they died to the law through the body of Christ'. What has God done about the seemingly all-powerful rule of sin and death? He has condemned sin on the cross, and has thereby undone the power of death. And so on. And so on.

We are in danger of being lulled by this constant refrain into insensibility to what Paul was actually saying — and, equally importantly, was heard to be saying in the world of his day. Crucifixes regularly appear as jewellery in today's post-Christian Western world, and the wearers are often blissfully unaware that their pretty ornament depicts the ancient equivalent, all in one, of the hangman's noose, the electric chair, the thumbscrew, and the rack. Or, to be more precise, something which combined all four but went far beyond them; crucifixion was such an utterly horrible thing that the very word was usually avoided in polite Roman society. Every time Paul spoke of

it — especially when he spoke in the same breath of salvation, love, grace and freedom — he and his hearers must have been conscious of the slap in the face thereby administered to their normal expectations and sensibilities. Somehow, we need to remind ourselves of this every time Paul mentions Jesus' death, especially the mode of that death.

When we attempt this exercise, it is precisely the slap in the face that gets to the point. God has reversed the world's values. He has done the impossible. He has turned shame into glory and glory into shame. His is the folly that outsmarts the wise, the weakness that overpowers the strong. The cross is for Paul the symbol, as it was the means, of the liberating victory of the one true God, the creator of the world, over all the enslaving powers that have usurped his authority. That is why it is at the heart of 'the gospel'. Isaiah spoke of a herald with a 'gospel' message; as his prophecy developed, emphasizing the victory of Israel's God over all the idols of Babylon, it contained at its heart the strange picture of the servant of YHWH, suffering and being vindicated. The world of Paul's audience knew of 'the gospel' as a message about someone, most likely a king or emperor, who had won a great victory, perhaps thereby attaining the throne. Paul, with both feet planted firmly in the prophets, addressed the pagan world with the news of a new king, a new emperor, a new Lord.

For this reason I suggest that we give priority — a priority among equals, perhaps, but still a priority — to those Pauline expressions of the crucifixion of Jesus which describe it as the decisive victory over the 'principalities and powers'. Nothing in the many other expressions of the meaning of the cross is lost if we put this in the centre. The announcement of 'the crucified Messiah' is the key to everything because it declares to the rulers of this age that their time is up; had they realized what was going on, 'they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Corinthians 1:18 — 2:8). Contrary to what casual onlookers might have thought, when Jesus was crucified it was he who was leading the principalities and powers in his triumphal procession, celebrating his victory over *them*, instead of the other way around (Colossians 2:14–15). The death of Jesus had the effect of liberating both Jew and Gentile from the enslaving force of the 'elements of the world' (Galatians 4:1–11). And, towering over almost everything else, the death of Jesus, seen as the culmination of his great act of obedience, is the means whereby the reign of sin and death is replaced with the reign of grace and righteousness (Romans 5:12–21). 'The gospel' is indeed the announcement of a royal victory.

When we ask how it was that Jesus' cruel death was the decisive victory over the powers, sin and death included, Paul at once replies: because it was the fulfilment of God's promise that through Abraham and his seed he would undo the evil in the world. God established his covenant with Abraham in the first place for this precise purpose. That is why, in the great sweeping argument of the letter to the Romans, Paul's exposition of God's faithfulness to his covenant (in technical language, his 'righteousness'), is explained in terms of the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham (3:21 – 4:25), and then explored in terms of the undoing of Adam's sin (5:1-2-21) and ultimately of the liberation of the whole creation (8:17-25). The same sequence of thought may be observed in various other places. In Galatians the full exposition of the covenant with Abraham, and how it has reached its dramatic climax in Jesus Christ, points ahead to the message of 'new creation' (6:15). In 2 Corinthians, similarly, new covenant (chapter 3) leads to new creation (chapter 5). And always the fulfilment focuses on the death of Jesus, the covenant-fulfilling act, the moment when God executed judicial sentence on sin itself (Romans 3:24-26; 8:3), the moment when God's astonishing love was unveiled in all its glory (Romans 5:6-11; 8:31-39).

This is fulfilment; not abrogation. It would be fatally easy to suppose that Paul acquired on the road to Damascus, or in his thinking soon after, a scheme of thought, focused on the cross, which made him want to abandon everything Jewish, including the sense that Israel's God was going to fulfil his promises at last. It would be possible (though very misleading) to read Philippians 3:7-8 in that sense — 'I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as so much rubbish, so that I may gain Christ'. Not so. It is certainly true that neither Paul nor any of his Jewish contemporaries had expected their God to act in anything like this way. But Paul's understanding of the death of Jesus was not a brand new idea appearing from nowhere. The power of his 'gospel' came precisely from the fact that it addressed the pagan world with the full weight of Jewish history and tradition behind it. Saul the Pharisee would have read the Jewish scriptures not least as a lament for all that had gone wrong — for Israel's failure and disloyalty, for her sin and rebellion, for the consequent national disasters, defeat, subjugation and exile. Read Psalm 74 (for instance), and imagine Saul of Tarsus praying it fervently in the Temple courtyard, under the eye of Roman guards watching from their fortress.

Israel's fate, in other words — the suffering at the hands of the pagans — had not been swept aside. It was not irrelevant. It had reached its climax

precisely in the death of Jesus, the representative Messiah of Israel. When Paul declared that 'the Messiah died for our sins according to the scriptures' — this, by the way, is the beginning of his official summary of 'the gospel' in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 — he does not mean that he can find half a dozen 'proof-texts' from scripture that he can cunningly twist into predictions of the crucifixion. He means that the entire scriptural story, the great drama of God's dealings with Israel, came together when the young Jew from Nazareth was nailed up by the Romans and left to die. Though we have here only glanced at a small fraction of what Paul says about the cross, we have said enough to make the point: the shameful death of Jesus at the hands of the pagans was, for Paul, the centre and starting-point of what 'the gospel' was all about. It was the fulfilment of the Isaianic message. It was the proclamation of the ultimate royal victory. It was the Jewish message of good news for the world.

But (someone might say) hundreds of Jews, young and old, were crucified by the Romans in the first century. Why was this execution so special? Paul's answer would have been twofold. This crucifixion was different because of who it was that was crucified, and because of what happened next. We shall take these in the reverse order: Jesus' resurrection, his Messiahship, and the fact that he is therefore Lord of the world. Together with the crucifixion, these constitute the basic elements of Paul's 'gospel'.

The risen Jesus

'If Christ is not raised, our proclamation is empty and so is your faith; if Christ is not raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins' (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). Without the resurrection, the crucifixion carries no gospel, no announcement of royal victory, and hence no consequences of salvation. But that doesn't mean that the cross is just a messy interlude prior to the real victory. As we have just seen, Paul understands Jesus' execution as the moment when the creator's love wins the victory over the rebellious creation, when the forces that have enslaved humans and the world are defeated once and for all. Yet, to continue this theological see-saw process, if that victory did not lead directly to Jesus' own resurrection, it did not happen at all. Paul, in line with a major theme throughout the Bible, understood sin and death as bound together in a tight nexus. If Jesus had defeated sin, death could not hold him. If (conversely) he rose again from the dead, it meant he had indeed dealt with sin on the cross — in other

words, that God had achieved at last what he had promised to Abraham and the prophets. That is how Paul's logic works in the first nineteen verses of 1 Corinthians 15, a deliberate set-piece exposition of Paul's 'gospel'.

Everything thus hinges on Jesus' resurrection. Scholars and popular writers often make a great song and dance about what Paul thought was about to happen in the future, as though his 'eschatological' or 'apocalyptic' beliefs had to do with events yet to occur. As far as Paul was concerned, the most important eschatological event, through which the living God had unveiled (or, if you like, 'apocalypsed') his plan to save the whole cosmos, *had occurred when Jesus rose from the dead*. He wasn't just living in the last days. He was living in the *first* days — of a whole new world order. As with the cross, the resurrection permeates Paul's thinking and writing; and it isn't by any means just the future resurrection, to which of course Paul looks forward. It is the resurrection of Jesus, to which he looks back.

It is vital to grasp that for a Pharisee of Paul's background and training the resurrection meant, inalienably and incontestably, the *bodily* resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15 rules out two possible ways of understanding the resurrection. On the one hand, Paul didn't see it as simply the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus didn't return into the same mode of physical existence as he had lived before. On the other hand, Paul didn't see it as the abandonment of Jesus' physical body. If you had suggested to him that 'the resurrection' might have occurred while the tomb of Jesus was still occupied by his corpse, he wouldn't just have disagreed; he would have suggested that you didn't understand what the relevant words meant. First-century Jews held a variety of beliefs about what God would do with, or to, his people after their death. But 'resurrection' was never a term covering lots of different options on that score. It had to do, specifically, with re-embodiment, with a new physical existence. When Paul talks about a 'spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:44), he doesn't mean 'spiritual' in the Platonic sense, i.e. non-material. He means a *body* (physical, in some sense), which is *constituted* by 'spirit'.

Paul believed, in fact, that Jesus had gone *through* death and *out* the *other* side. Jesus had gone into a new mode of physicality, for which there was no precedent and of which there was, as yet, no other example. And this too had happened 'according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:4). Once again, this doesn't mean that Paul could dig out a handful of biblical proof-texts predicting that someone would rise again as an isolated event within history. It means that he saw the entire biblical narrative moving this way.

'Resurrection' was, in Ezekiel 37, a metaphor for the return of Israel from exile. When Paul was faced with the fact of Jesus' resurrection, he concluded that the return from exile had in fact happened. Exile had reached its height in Jesus' death; now he had come through death, through the ultimate exile, and was set free not just from Greece or Rome, from Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas, but from sin and death, the ultimate enemies (1 Corinthians 15:25-6). This meant that the Age to Come, the Eschaton of Jewish expectation, had already arrived, even though it didn't look like Paul had expected. It meant that Israel had in principle been redeemed, in the person of her anointed representative. It meant that the Gentiles were now to be summoned to join Israel in celebrating the new day, the day of deliverance.

It meant, too, that the Age to Come, for which Israel had longed, was arriving *in two stages*. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul reworks the more or less traditional model of a Jewish apocalypse, making it clear that the end *has* already happened (in Jesus' resurrection) and that the end *is still* to happen (when all Jesus' people are raised to life). In Romans 8 he amplifies this, and broadens its scope: Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee of the future liberation from death and corruption not only of all those who are 'in Christ' but of creation as a whole. Paul is conscious of living between the End (Mark One) and the End (Mark Two). This is the real novelty in his theology. But it remains a novelty which arises within his Pharisaic Judaism, not by abandoning that frame of reference and getting a new one from somewhere else.

It meant, directly and most importantly, that despite his shameful crucifixion — which, by itself, would have meant the shattering of any messianic aspirations he might have had — Jesus of Nazareth really was Israel's Messiah, the true, God-given, anointed king.

King Jesus

'Christ' is not a name. It is a title. It becomes a name (denoting somebody but without extra connotation), at some point in early Christianity, as its Jewish meaning is forgotten by Gentile converts. Equally, 'Christ' in the first century does not mean 'a divine being'. That, too, is a later development (as we shall see, Paul thought Jesus was divine; but the word 'Christ' did not express, perhaps could not have expressed, that belief). 'Christ', for Paul, means 'Messiah'. And 'Messiah', of course, means 'the anointed one'.

Where this is ignored (as it often is in both scholarly and popular writing) we should not be surprised to find that a good many Pauline passages remain stubbornly opaque.

That phrase could denote other people; a priest, for instance. But its major referent in first-century Judaism was the coming king. Scholars sometimes write about Jewish expectations of a Messiah on the basis of literary speculations at the time. Sometimes, in this process, even 'Messiah' can sound somewhat 'religious', removed from actual first-century life. We know, mostly from the pages of Josephus, of a dozen or more messianic or would-be messianic movements within a hundred years either side of Jesus. This is the atmosphere we need to breathe if we want to understand what Paul is talking about. He believed that Jesus was the true king. An unexpected king, yes. A king who turned everything, including expectations of what the coming king would do and be, upside down, yes. But the true king nonetheless. The resurrection proved it. To remind ourselves of this it would do no harm from time to time to translate *Jesus Christos* not as 'Jesus Christ', nor even as 'Jesus the Messiah', but as 'King Jesus'.

Paul's 'gospel' is therefore 'the gospel of Christ': not so much a message which is the property of the king, as a message whose subject is the king. It is through this king that the true God has made himself known. Paul's preaching of the gospel involved him in portraying Jesus Christ publicly as the crucified one (Galatians 3:1). For Paul, the reason why there is good news at all is that in and through the cross of King Jesus the one true God has dealt decisively with evil. The prisoners can only be comforted if it is true that the jailor has himself been locked up. Zion can only receive truly good news if it is true that Babylon has been defeated. At the heart of Paul's gospel there stands the claim that the death of Jesus the king has defeated evil at its very heart.

The claim that Paul regarded Jesus as the king, the Messiah, and that he announced him as such, is controversial within New Testament scholarship at present, and I want, in explaining why I make this claim, to show how the logic of it works in practice.

Let us return to Romans 1:3-4, where, as we saw, Paul introduces himself and his letter with a brief and pithy formula (see above, page 45). Generations of scholars, determined to resist the idea that Paul thought of Jesus in any way as the king, the Messiah, the true Son of David, have of course allowed this passage to drop off the front of Romans, as they hurried on to what they took to be the real introductory formula in verses

16-17, the announcement of the righteousness of God (about which I shall have more to say later). They then dismiss verses 3 and 4 as a 'traditional formula' which Paul is quoting to put his audience at rest, even though he himself does not regard it as an accurate summary of his thinking. But it is absurd to suppose that Paul, who regularly uses his opening formulae to introduce the major subject-matter of his letters, should have slipped in such a carefully worded formula at such a crucial place in such a vital letter if it does not in fact represent not only what he thinks in general but what he intends to say in what follows. The latter point is clearly impossible to prove without going through a detailed exegesis of Romans; but I hope at least to point out ways in which we can see this royal theology at the heart of Paul's whole thought.

The formula, which Paul explicitly designates as his 'gospel', speaks of the Son of David. We know from a good many Jewish sources, not least Qumran, that Davidic sonship was central to some ideas at least of Messiahship; and we know at least one or two of the scriptural texts which were regularly adduced to support the point. Perhaps the best known is 2 Samuel 7. In Nathan's oracle to David, God promises David that he will build him a 'house': when David dies, God will raise up his seed after him, who will sit on his throne, and (God says) 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.' This promise is celebrated in the later version of the same incident in Chronicles; and of course in two royal psalms in particular, Psalms 2 and 89. All these passages appear in various Jewish traditions of speculation about the coming Messiah.

When, therefore, Paul tells us that the gospel he preaches is the one promised beforehand in holy scripture, and that its central figure is one who was from the seed of David and is now marked out as Son of God, we would have to imitate Lord Nelson, putting a blind eye to the telescope, to deny that Paul intends to evoke precisely this collocation of scriptural themes, which is about as well attested in Jewish literature as any collection of messianic ideas. He is, in other words, announcing a gospel which is not just a message about the availability of salvation, which happens to have been achieved by someone called 'Jesus', whose other name (for Paul) is 'Christ'. He is announcing that the messianic promises of salvation have come true in Jesus. Jesus is the king, not only of Israel but of all the world. When Paul proceeds at once to say exactly this in verse 5 — which states clearly enough that God has sent Paul to summon all the nations to allegiance to this King Jesus — we should not doubt that it is this messianic concept which he has in

mind. And when, later in the letter, we meet again and again the sense that the promises made to Abraham and his family have come true in this Jesus — that Jesus has offered God the obedience and faithfulness which should have characterized Israel but did not; that he is the Messiah from Israel according to the flesh, and now also Lord of all the world — then we have initial justification in saying that Romans 1:3-4 does indeed provide the thematic launching-pad for the letter's deepest argument. Paul's theology in Romans is, at its heart, royal.

So, I suggest, is his theology in Galatians. We may consider briefly the long argument which runs from the start of Galatians 3:1 to 4:11. This is all about the way in which the promises to Abraham have been fulfilled precisely 'in Christ', in the Messiah. There are many Jewish texts in which the historical sequence of thought, in answer to the question 'how will God be true to his promises to Abraham?', reaches its answer and fulfilment as 'in the Son of David, the Messiah'. Are there indications, in addition to the high concentration of the word *Christos* at precisely these points of the chapter, that Paul may have had this sequence of thought in mind?

The answer is Yes. Central to his argument is the idea of the 'seed': the true seed of Abraham, the fulfilment of the promises. As several scholars have shown, this provides a natural link to a whole collection of messianic promises which grow out of the Nathan oracle we mentioned a moment ago, in which the Messiah is the 'seed of David'. And, at one crucial turning-point in the argument, Paul alludes to another of the best-known messianic promises, that in Genesis 49:10.

The promise, much quoted and studied by Jews in the second-temple period, is difficult to translate, but it was certainly understood at the time to mean 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah until he comes whose right it is' — in other words, the royal house of Judah will continue until it finds its fulfilment in the Messiah. The critical phrase 'until he comes', and the sense of a long waiting after which the promises will be fulfilled, is what we find in Galatians 3:19: the law was given, because of transgressions, *until he comes, the 'seed' to whom the promise was made*. Within his overall argument about Abraham, Paul is operating with an implicit royal theology and exegesis. We then find, in increasing concentration in the rest of the chapter, usage of *Christos* which, as I have argued elsewhere, can best be explained in terms of 'incorporation into the people of the Messiah': he describes Christians as 'baptized into Christ', 'putting on Christ', 'one in Christ', and 'belonging to Christ' (3:27-29). The only way we can avoid reading the entire argument

messianically is if, once again, we employ the method of Lord Nelson.

Galatians 3 then leads straight into Galatians 4, in which Paul uses explicitly messianic language to describe Jesus. He is the lord and heir of all things; he is the Son of God (a royal title, remember, in Psalms 2 and 89); he is the one through whom the pagan nations are brought into submission, and the true people of God liberated. Through his coming and work the true God has finally been revealed. The 'gospel of God' is thus indeed 'the gospel of God concerning his Son'. For Paul, 'the gospel' is the story of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, seen as King Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel.

Jesus is Lord

The final step in Paul's gospel narrative was to assert of Jesus what the Psalmist asserted of the true Davidic king:

I will tell of the decree of the LORD:

He said to me, 'You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.' (Psalm 2:7-8)

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the king's son...

May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Psalm 72:1, 8)

I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him...

He shall cry to me: 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'
I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
(Psalm 89:19-20, 26-27)

In other words, the coming King of the Jews will also be the king of all the earth. This, of course, is simply the leading edge of the doctrine of election, the choice of Israel as the one people of the one true God: if Israel is the

people through whom God will address the whole world, Israel's king will be the focal point of that action. The Messiah will be Lord, not only of Israel, but also of the whole world.

This is precisely what Paul says of Jesus:

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, rich in mercy to all who call upon him. (Romans 10:12)

Paul uses the title 'Lord' for Jesus so frequently that he uses take up several columns in a small-print concordance. Like *Christos*, though, the word *Kyrios* ('Lord'), is often taken for granted, or even (perhaps as a result of its over-use in popular devotional address to God or Jesus) downgraded into almost another mere name, denoting Jesus but not saying anything much about him. It is vital, if we want to understand all the dimensions of Paul's gospel, that we reclaim the full significance of this heavily freighted word.

Like 'gospel' itself, 'Lord' carries two apparently quite different meanings, depending on whether you look towards Paul's Jewish upbringing or his Greco-Roman audience. In the present section I shall concentrate on the latter; but in the next chapter – which is really an extension of the present one, though its topic is so large and important that it needs space of its own – I shall draw out further the significance of the former.

In the Greco-Roman world around which Paul moved so widely, and which formed the primary audience for his message, the word *Kyrios* could refer to all sorts of people. It could sometimes simply be a polite form of address, like the English 'Sir'. But, just as the polite English 'Sir' does not rule out the stricter sense, used to address a knight, so in Paul's world *Kyrios* was regularly used, not merely for polite address to a social superior, but to denote *the* social superior above all: the emperor. Ultimately, for the Roman point of view, there was only one Lord of the world. According to Paul, he now had a rival.

Luke makes this point clearly enough, when (despite what many think of as his desire to defend Paul against the charge of being a seditious trouble-maker) he has him brought before the magistrates in Thessalonica on a charge of saying that 'there is another king, named Jesus' (Acts 17:7). It is hard to imagine Luke inventing this charge.

In fact, Paul in his letters was saying more or less exactly the same thing. In a famous passage, Philippians 2:5-11 (which we shall look at in more detail in the next chapter), Paul is not simply articulating a breathtaking vision of who Jesus is, and indeed of who God is. He is also, quite directly

and explicitly, subverting the claims of the other great would-be lord of the world of his day, namely Caesar. 'Every tongue' he writes, 'shall confess that "Jesus is Lord"', to the glory of God the Father. 'As with 'gospel', so with 'Lord'. Paul's language is borrowed not only from Isaiah, but also from the imperial cult. In several texts from the Roman empire, we find formulaic phrases, referring to the emperor's accession, in which the sequence of thought runs as follows. Such-and-such a person (Augustus, Nero, or whoever) has been a good servant of the state, perhaps by winning some great victory; we therefore hail him as our lord, and entrust ourselves to him to be our saviour. We hail him as *Kyrios*, and trust him to be our *Soter*.

Paul, writing to the Philippian church (Philippi was, of course, a Roman colony), cannot but have been aware of the implications of what he was saying. Indeed, I think it is likely that this is part of his real message to the Philippian church: don't be lulled into thinking that you can serve two masters, that there are two Lords of the world. There is only one, and that is Jesus. 'Every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord'; then, at the climactic end of the next chapter, 'Our citizenship is in heaven; and from there we await the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ... who has the power to submit all things to himself' (Philippians 3:20-21). Paul's gospel was indeed a royal announcement. He had not left behind the category of kingship when he went out, away from the Jewish world, to preach to the Gentiles. That, on the contrary, was the context where the specifically Jewish message of the gospel really began to bite. 'Another king' – as Paul knew only too well, people tend to get put in prison for saying that sort of thing. We should not be surprised to discover that that was where Paul was when he wrote half of his letters.

The Gospel of God

We have studied Paul's 'gospel', and have seen that underneath his regular formulae ('the Lord Jesus Christ' and so on) there is a carefully worked out sequence of thought, an implicit story-line, which when properly understood reveals that he both remained totally rooted in his Jewish world and was aiming his message directly at the principalities and powers of the Roman world, from Caesar downwards. Ultimately, though, this message was not simply a message about Jesus. Everything he said about Jesus was, for him, a way of talking about God.

In the world Paul was addressing, the word 'God' (*Theos* in Greek, *Deus* in Latin) was a question mark. People wrote books about whether God, or the gods, existed, and if so what he, she, it or they were like, what they did, whether they interfered in ordinary mortal lives, and so on. Almost everybody took the gods mildly seriously; hardly anybody took them very seriously. In the world Paul had come from, however, there was only one God. He was the creator of the world; he was also the God of Israel. And almost everybody took him very seriously indeed.

Every loyal Jew believed, moreover, that one day the wider world, as well, would have to take the God of Israel seriously. He would establish his kingdom over all the world. He would reveal that Israel had been his special people all along. He would condemn the world for its idolatry and immorality. This is the point of a book such as the *Wisdom of Solomon*, written roughly at the time of Jesus and Paul. If Saul of Tarsus had felt called, as a Pharisee, to preach to the Gentiles, this would have been part of his stock-in-trade, coupled with an invitation to worship the true God, the God of Israel, and to take on the Jewish way of life, the Torah.

The 'gospel' of Paul the apostle was also a message about God, the one God of Israel, the creator of the world. It, too, was a summons to reject pagan idolatry and to turn to the true God, the source of life and all good things. Paul summarizes this message in the first chapter of what some hold to be his first surviving letter, namely 1 Thessalonians. And we see in several other passages how he viewed the effect of his preaching. Consider, first, Galatians 4:1-11.

¹ What I mean is this. So long as the heir is a minor, he is no different from a slave, even if he is master of everything; ² but he is under guardians and overseers until the time set by the father. ³ So with us: when we were in our minority, we were enslaved under the 'elements of the world'; ⁴ but when the fulness of the time arrived, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ so that he might redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are his children, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father!' ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a child; and if a child, then an heir through God.

⁸ When you formerly did not know God, we were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to

know God — or rather, to be known by God — how can you turn back again to the weak and poverty-stricken 'elements' to whom you want to be enslaved again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days, months, seasons and years! ¹¹ I am afraid for you, afraid that I may have wasted my time in my work with you.

This passage stands at a climactic moment in the whole letter, drawing together the argument of the preceding chapter and laying the foundations for what is to come. It may thus fairly be seen as a summary of 'the gospel' which is so clearly stated as a main theme in the opening section of the letter. Verses 1-7 state in one particular form the content of 'the gospel' which Paul preached: 'when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law'. Verses 8-11 describe substantially the context and effect of that gospel-preaching: formerly the Galatians did not 'know God', but now — as a result of Paul's preaching about Jesus — they have come to know God — 'or rather, to be known by God' (4:9). The passage, in other words, spells out in more detail the challenge which Paul throws down in 1:6-9: how can the Galatians turn away from the true gospel to a pseudo-gospel, a human invention, a parody of the truth?

According to 4:1-11, the message of the Pauline gospel is this: the true God has sent his Son, in fulfilment of the prophecies of scripture, to redeem his people from their bondage to false gods, the 'elements of the world' (4:3, 9). He now sends his own spirit to make his people truly what they were before only in theory and hope — his own children, heirs of his world. Equipped with this gospel, the Galatian Christians now *know the true God*, and are known by him. That is, they have received the great blessing promised by Isaiah throughout chapters 40-55. The one true God has revealed himself in saving them, routing the idols of the nations in doing so.

This message of good news, with the cross of Jesus at its very heart, decisively confronts the power of the spurious gods. The God now revealed in the sending of the Son and the spirit (4:1-7) is the God beside whom the defeated principalities and powers pale into insignificance (4:8-11). The 'gospel' is for Paul, at its very heart, *an announcement about the true God as opposed to the false gods*. This announcement was, and Paul expected it to be, controversial. The riot in Ephesus (referred to in Acts 19) was not entirely a misunderstanding. If Paul's message was true, the makers of idols were right to perceive him as a threat.

There is a good deal more to say about what Paul meant by the word 'God'. But in order to say it we shall need to dig deeper to the very heart of Paul's gospel, and this will take another chapter to do. If the gospel was both the message about Jesus and the message about God, what was the relationship, in Paul's mind, between Jesus and God?

Conclusion

Before we can move to this question, some words of conclusion about Paul's gospel. My proposal has been that 'the gospel' is not, for Paul, a message about 'how one gets saved', in an individual and ahistorical sense. It is a fourfold announcement about Jesus:

1. In Jesus of Nazareth, specifically in his cross, the decisive victory has been won over all the powers of evil, including sin and death themselves.
2. In Jesus' resurrection the New Age has dawned, inaugurating the long-awaited time when the prophecies would be fulfilled, when Israel's exile would be over, and the whole world would be addressed by the one creator God.
3. The crucified and risen Jesus was, all along, Israel's Messiah, her representative king.
4. Jesus was therefore also the Lord, the true king of the world, the one at whose name every knee would bow.

It is, moreover, a double and dramatic announcement about God:

1. The God of Israel is the one true God, and the pagan deities are mere idols.
2. The God of Israel is now made known in and through Jesus himself.

Each aspect of this announcement is, I believe, vital if we are to understand what Paul means by 'gospel' at all. It is because Paul sees his Galatian opponents failing to grasp this whole sequence of thought that he accuses them of being seduced by 'another gospel'. It is because Paul wants his Roman readers to get things as clear as possible before he arrives there that he writes his greatest (and densest) letter, a letter which, by being all about Jesus, is even more so all about God.

The 'gospel', then, is, as Paul says in Romans 1:16, 'the power of God for salvation'. The word for 'power' here is *dynamis*, from which we get 'dynamite'. To understand Paul's meaning, we may invoke a further technical term. Paul speaks in Acts (20:24) of 'the gospel of the grace of God'. But what is grace? Grace is not a 'thing' — a heavenly gas, a pseudo-substance, which can be passed to and fro or pumped down pipelines. The word 'grace' is a shorthand way of speaking about God himself, the God who loves totally and unconditionally, whose love overflows in self-giving in creation, in redemption, in rooting out evil and sin and death from his world, in bringing to life that which was dead. Paul's gospel reveals this God in all his grace, all his love.

But it doesn't just reveal all this so that people can admire it from a distance. It reveals it precisely by putting it into action. The royal proclamation is not simply the conveying of true information about the kingship of Jesus. It is the putting into effect of that kingship, the decisive and authoritative summoning to allegiance. Paul discovered, at the heart of his missionary practice, that when he announced the lordship of Jesus Christ, the sovereignty of King Jesus, this very announcement was the means by which the living God reached out with his love and changed the hearts and lives of men and women, forming them into a community of love across traditional barriers, liberating them from the paganism which had held them captive, enabling them to become, for the first time, the truly human beings they were meant to be. The gospel, Paul would have said, is not just about God's power saving people. It *is* God's power at work to save people.

When Paul announced this gospel message, it carried its own weight, its own authority, quite independently of the rhetorical or linguistic skill of the herald. But if the heralding of this gospel was the authoritative summons to allegiance, it could not but pose a challenge to all other 'powers' that claimed human loyalty. That is why to retain, or to embrace, symbols and praxis which spoke of other loyalties and other allegiances was to imply that other powers were still being invoked. And that, according to Paul, was to deny 'the truth of the gospel'.

Paul, then, had grasped the truth: the one true God was now made known in Jesus (and in the Spirit). And, grasping that, he knew that he was himself grasped, held, sustained and saved by the faithful love of the faithful God. Being so grasped, he found himself 'a servant of Christ, set apart for God's gospel'; in proclaiming this gospel, he discovered again and again that it was indeed God's power for salvation.

WHAT ST PAUL REALLY SAID

But this argument simply brings us back to the question I highlighted a moment ago, to which we can now turn at last. If God is the king, and if Jesus is the king, what is the relation, in Paul's mind at least, between God and Jesus?

Notes

1. The inscription was found in Priene on the Asia Minor coast: *Priene Inscriptions*, edited by F. Hiller von Gärtringen, 105, 40.