

The Christian Proclamation as Gospel

The Polemics, Politics and Praxis of *euangelion* in the Graeco-Roman World of the First Century¹

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Abstract

The lexical choice made by the first Christians to present the Christian message as *euangelion* is a stark one. This is so because *euangelion* is used in Ancient Greek literature almost always as a technical term for the news of victory, a term used by those in power. This choice made by the first Christians leads to polemics with those in power. The politics and praxis of victory are affected too in this incursion of early Christianity in the area of power language. Thus, *euangelion* is captured and restructured as being the '*euangelion* of the kingdom' and 'of Christ.' This leads to a different understanding of the way a citizen should live in the world.

Keywords: Gospel, victory, power, polemics, politics

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The outlook of this paper is given by the observation that εὐαγγέλιον (good tidings) is used in ancient Greek sources almost always in the context of war or enmity, being the language of victory. εὐαγγέλιον is a technical term for the news of victory associated with offering of sacrifices, celebrations, honor, and rewards; it is a term used by and for those in power. Based on these observations, I argue that in order to have a good understanding of εὐαγγέλιον in New Testament the reader has to consider these facts and he/she has to discern the level of embedding of these ideas in transmitting the Christian message. The lexical choice made by the early Christians to present the Christian message as εὐαγγέλιον is of major importance. I argue that this decision has to do with an understanding of the Christian message as being a language of power and victory and from this, on a different level, the Christian message to be the only true εὐαγγέλιον. This type of language is polemic, mixed with politics, and it has to do with praxis affecting the empire.

The structure of my argument starts with a discussion of Greek texts which show the universe of εὐαγγέλιον in antiquity, and then, keeping an eye on that universe, an analysis of the most known New Testament texts in which εὐαγγέλιον is central. Based on these steps, at the end of the paper I will draw my conclusions about describing the Christian message as 'glad tidings.'

εὐαγγέλιον in Ancient Greek Literature

The main usage of εὐαγγέλιον in Greek sources is as the 'good tidings' of victory after a war. It is a language of victory, power and honor. (See Isocrates, *Areopagiticus* 10.142, Diodorus of Sicily, *History*, 15.74.3, Plutarch, *Caius Marius*, 22.3, and *Demetrius*, 17.5.) That is why

there are situations in which εὐαγγέλιον is counterfeited. The impact of εὐαγγέλιον is so great that even if an army loses an initial battle in a war, they bring good tidings for sustaining the moral of those who do not know yet the real outcome of the battle and to keep them in good spirits for a future battle (if that battle will ever occur). Of course, when the truth comes out there are punishments for that lie. For this kind of events see the narrative by Xenophon in *Hellenica* 1.6.36. Eteonicus lies about the outcome of the battle of Chios. The Athenians were victorious but they, due to whether conditions, were not able to spread the news of victory. Eteonicus instructs the dispatch-boat to say that Callicratidas has been victorious and that all the ships of the Athenians had been destroyed. And he began to offer sacrifices for the good news (εὐαγγέλια). Another example is given by Isocrates in *Areopagiticus* 142.10, a famous athenian orator (436-338 BC), when he tells the Athenians that if they are complacent with their status of power will fall again to their enemies. The obtuseness and confusion describe the state of the city. They have made poor decisions regarding with whom to become allies and have not been able to preserve their good fortune. To celebrate the 'good news' (εὐαγγέλια) of such accomplishments is a recipe for disaster. The point of Isocrates is that someone can present something as 'good news' and celebrate it, even when that is not worthy of being considered as such. In a different context, but under the same question of something being worthy to be considered 'good tidings' of victory, it is the argument made by Phocion in Plutarch, *Phocion* 16.8.1 where, upon the death of Philip, the Macedonian king, he was opposed to the people's offering sacrifices of glad tidings (εὐαγγέλια); for it was an ignoble thing, he said, to rejoice thereat, and the force which had been ar-

rayed against them at Chaeroneia was diminished by only one person. This position of Phocius was opposed by that of Demosthenes, who, when Philip was dead and the Alexander had come to the throne, ordered a shrine to be dedicated to Pausanias (the person who killed Philip) and made the senate in charge of offering sacrifices of thanksgiving for good news (ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΩΝ ΘΥΣΙΑΣ) (The Speeches of Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon*, 160). The Greeks have the same attitude when Alexander dies. The State will offer sacrifices to celebrate the good tidings (εὐαγγέλια) of Alexander's death. (Plutarch, *Moralia, Sayings of the Kings and Commanders*, 188.12)

We have these kinds of actions because of the great impact of εὐαγγέλιον upon people. When they speak in that way they see themselves victorious, honorable and powerful. εὐαγγέλιον is capturing this deep longing for victory, safety and celebrations. This mindset is described masterfully by Homer in *Odyssey*, 14.150 when he tells about the return of Odysseus from war. Odysseus, disguised as an old man, talks with Eumaeus, one of his servants, about the return of Odysseus. The dialogue is painful because Odysseus' servant is still faithful to his good master; his longing for Odysseus is greater than his longing for his own parents. Odysseus loved him and took care of him and he considers his master to be an 'honored friend.' The way Odysseus answers this is by addressing his servant as 'friend,' but Eumaeus does not make the connection to see that the person who talks to him is his honored master. The point of the dialogue is that of the 'reward for bearing good tidings' so soon as he shall come. The most highly anticipated event is the return of Odysseus from war and that is the reference of 'good tidings' (εὐαγγέλιον). Odysseus himself is the bearer of these 'good tidings.' The

reward is to clothe him in cloak and tunic, handsome clothes. Actually, his servant is to do again his duties toward his master and to prepare him to be seen by all.

This powerful impact of εὐαγγέλιον is seen in the reaction of Pompey's army when they heard that Mithridates was killed. The event is narrated by Plutarch in *Pompey* 61.4. Pompey and his army had pitched their camp within short distance of Petra when messengers from Pontus brought the good tidings (εὐαγγέλια) of Mithridates' death. Upon this, the army, filled with joy, as was natural, gave itself up to sacrifices and entertainments, feeling that in the person of Mithridates ten thousand enemies had died.

There is a similar joy when Agrippa hears the good news of Tiberius' death ('The lion is dead.'). The event is narrated by Josephus *AJ* 18.229.2: 'Nay', said he, 'but all sorts of thanks and happiness attend thee for this news (εὐαγγέλιος) of thine; only I wish that what thou sayest may prove true.' There is similar joy in the east when the 'good news' of Vespasian becoming the emperor are spread out. Josephus narrates the situation in *BJ* 4.618.4 as follows: 'Accordingly Vespasian, looking upon himself as already entrusted with government, got all things ready for his journey to Rome. Now fame carried this news abroad more suddenly than one could have thought, that he was emperor over the east, upon which every city kept festivals, and celebrated sacrifices and oblations for such good news (εὐαγγέλια). After the unstable and dangerous year of the four emperors, Vespasian is expected to bring stability, order, and peace.

In LXX we have the same usage. There are two events in which εὐαγγέλιον is used: 2 Sam. 18 and 2 Kings 7. In the first event, King

David was sitting between the two gates expecting the news from the battle with Absalom. In that day the king's son was killed, and even if the Lord has vindicated David from the hand of his enemies this news is not perceived as good tidings. When Achimaas tells Ioab that he wants to run and carry the good tidings to the king, Ioab tells him that in this day you will not be a man of good tidings (εὐαγγέλιος) because the son of the king has died (18:20).

The second event is from the war between Israel and Syria. The four leprous men found the camp of the Syrian army deserted. When they bring the report to the king of Israel, this event is understood by them as being about a 'day of good news' (ημερα ευαγγελιας).

Thus, as in extra biblical Greek literature, εὐαγγέλιον is the language of victory in war or enmity: the good tidings of victory.

εὐαγγέλιον in New Testament texts

Is there any link between this established usage of εὐαγγέλιον in the Greek sources and the New Testament? My answer is yes. There is a link and I understand this on the lines of polemics, politics and praxis.

The New Testament vocabulary shows that the New Testament authors were familiar with the variety of terms used in the Greek language of the first century for speaking about spreading news, offering information, announcing some event. Here are the other terms which should have been sufficient: ἀγγέλλω - to tell, to inform, κατηχέω - to report in a relatively detailed manner, προγράφω - to provide information in a vivid manner, ἐρεύγομαι - to announce in a sudden and emphatic manner, ἀγγελία - message, announcement, διασαέω - to tell all, to relate fully, καταγγέλλω, ἐξαγγέλλω - to proclaim throughout,

κηρύσσω - to announce in a formal or official manner by means of a herald, φάσις, φήμη - information concerning a person or an event, ἄκοή - news, report. The lexical choice of εὐαγγέλιον made by the first Christians points us in the direction of debate with this technical term as used in the empire. That is the explanation for Paul saying that he is not ashamed of the εὐαγγέλιον (Rom. 1:16). The εὐαγγέλιον he preaches across the Roman empire clashes with the established usage. The early Christians see the εὐαγγέλιον they preach as 'εὐαγγέλιον of salvation' (Eph. 1:13) and 'εὐαγγέλιον of peace' (Eph. 6:15). Salvation and peace are among the main expected realities brought by the 'good tidings.' It is not hard to hear the polemics of these announcements.

We have this usage of εὐαγγέλιον because Jesus initiated it. The witness of the canonical Gospels is that Jesus preached 'the εὐαγγέλιον of the kingdom' (Matt. 4:23, 9:35) or the 'εὐαγγέλιον of God' (Mark 1:14). The 'gospel of the kingdom' and the 'gospel of God' should be understood as being interchangeable. This is the good news of the victory of God, his dominion is victorious over the dominion of demons, sickness, and death. Paul himself says that he has received the εὐαγγέλιον through revelation from the exalted Christ (Gal. 1:11). In this way, we have the usage among early Christians of the phrase εὐαγγελιον του Χριστου ('the gospel of Christ.'). One of the main things about the εὐαγγέλιον was its truth. The 'truth of the gospel' (Gal. 2:5,14), should be preserved at all costs. We already saw how many times the 'good news' was falsified in the past. The debates with the Jewish Christians in Galatia and with Gentile Christians in Corinth shows the importance of the matter. The main idea is that the victory of God in Christ over the dominion of sin and death is the content of the good news which brings

the era of salvation and peace. And this truth has to be defended because of its political and ethical implications. Perhaps the most political text in which εὐαγγέλιον is used in NT is that from Phil. 1:27: 'Only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.' Life as a citizen should reflect the 'εὐαγγέλιον of Christ.' The Christians are citizens of earth and of heaven, and the citizenship of heaven should be reflected in their lives as citizens of earth. The life as citizen worthy of the εὐαγγέλιον is a life in which your own status in life and society qualifies you for a life of service and obedience (Phil. 2:5-8). This is the 'mind of Christ' which should govern our relationships in the church and the city. This has to be so because Jesus Christ has received the name above all names and this should lead to worship and confession that 'Jesus Christ is Lord.'

The most developed description of the εὐαγγέλιον is given in Romans 1:3-4 and 1:16. Having sent this letter to the Churches in Rome, it is not difficult to read between the lines and to hear the echoes where the εὐαγγέλιον is concerned. The 'εὐαγγέλιον of God' is about his Son. His Son came from the lineage of David. On the one hand, he lived in the dominion of flesh as Messiah, the promised davidic king, and on the other hand, he lives in the dominion of Spirit, appointed Son of God in power from the resurrection of the dead. This Christology in stages shows the way in which the content of εὐαγγέλιον is restructured in early Christianity. Perhaps Paul is using traditional material when he speaks in this way about the gospel. The ideas of kingship, power, and dominion shape the content of the 'good news.' This is what God had in view for ages before. The dominion of flesh is taken upon his Son and redeemed it, and his Son inaugurates the dominion of the Spirit through resurrection of the dead. He is enthroned Son of God in power. This is

imperial language. This is what brings salvation and peace because the sin, flesh and death are defeated. This is the 'truth of the gospel' which has to be preserved at all costs. Paul is not ashamed of this εὐαγγέλιον. This message is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes. This is so, because the righteousness of God is revealed in this εὐαγγέλιον on the basis of faith leading to faith. The 'obedience of faith' is the right answer when somebody hears this εὐαγγέλιον. God acts and rightens those who believe and obey their new Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the 'εὐαγγέλιον of Christ' which Paul proclaimed from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom. 15:19).

Conclusion

Therefore, touching on the essential NT texts about εὐαγγέλιον, I can say that the early Christianity captured and restructured the technical term of εὐαγγέλιον. The 'εὐαγγέλιον of the kingdom' is the 'εὐαγγέλιον of God', and 'εὐαγγέλιον of Christ,' and 'εὐαγγέλιον of salvation,' and 'εὐαγγέλιον of peace.' The confrontation with the powers of the darkness is won, the new king is enthroned as Lord over all, both the dead and the living (Rom. 14:9), and this is seen in living as citizens a life worthy of the 'εὐαγγέλιον of Christ.' Polemics, politics and praxis are all embedded in this massive incursion of early Christianity in the area of power language.

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