

The Gospel of—or About—Jesus

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The alternatives here are not between leaving Jesus in or out of the gospel picture. Jesus figures centrally in both options, but in much different roles. In one he is the decisive object of faith. In the other he is the decisive figure who points to the object of faith by his words and deeds and who invites others to be a part of the new thing that God is doing.

He didn't explain why that was so that day.

But I later learned that in some cases the prepositions of the New Testament Greek are inarguably clear, while in others they are trickier, requiring more research.

And then there are the times when the original (well, let's say the closest one we have to the original) scriptural preposition is absent altogether and the responsible translator has either to determine the meaning from the linguistic context or simply to make an informed choice because, despite the most careful research, the meaning remains ambiguous.

Just recently I was waiting to be invited into a meeting at a church and, trying to find something to occupy my brain, noticed that the nearby shelf contained a number of Bibles in various English translations. So I pulled out a sampling and checked on how each translated the first verse of the Gospel according to Mark.

They were all pretty much the same. No birth narrative, just the bold statement that this is the beginning of the gospel, or good news, or good message, or good proclamation identified with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

But there was one glaring exception, involving, of all things, a preposition.

The old King James Version represented one translational choice: "The beginning of the gospel *of* Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The New Revised Standard Version followed that translation exactly, except it substituted "good news" for "gospel." The preposition "of" remained the same.

When, however, I turned to the New International Version, it read, "The beginning of the gospel *about* Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

That was the translational path also for The New Testament in Today's English Version: *about* rather than *of*.

When I got back to my study and checked out still more versions, it was the same divide between *of* and *about*.

The question, of course, is whether this division in the house of translators makes any difference.

I believe it does.

But I need to make it clear that I am not attributing bad faith or bad motives or inferior scholarly skills to those with whom I disagree in interpreting the preposition-less first sentence of Mark's Gospel. My longtime friend, teacher and colleague, Jay Wilcoxon, has persuaded me that, given the *Greek* construction of that first sentence in Mark, there is genuine ambiguity about which of the *English* prepositions should be chosen and that either can be justified on linguistic grounds.

But which *English* preposition is chosen makes an immense theological and socio-ethical difference, I want to argue.

To put the issue in its starkest terms: Is the good news Jesus himself or the kingdom of God he proclaims?

If Jesus proclaims *himself* as the gospel—the good message—then the gospel is *about* him, and it follows that his followers will believe *in him*. That, in a strict sense, is the test of faith and faith-practice: believing *in* Jesus as the Chosen One of God. The follower's faith and faith-practice *in him* is based on not just Jesus' self-proclamation but also on his wondrous works of compassion and healing, of self-giving and sacrifice, and his being resurrected by God from the dead and being given eternal life and power with the Divine Parent.

Clearly, if both textually and existentially, one holds that this is the Christian gospel, then translating the ambiguous first sentence of Mark's gospel into English with the preposition "about" would be entirely justified and fully appropriate. And yes, using the preposition "of" even allows for the same christological interpretation as those who opt for "about." Indeed, those translators who use "of" may be choosing to be intentionally ambiguous themselves, permitting the reader to understand Jesus himself to be the gospel. There's plenty of evidence in other parts of the New Testament and in this history of Christianity to support such an understanding. As Rudolf Bultmann put it so well, "the proclaimer became the proclaimed."

But if in the Synoptic gospels Jesus truly proclaims not himself but rather the reign and rule, the kingdom and dominion of God, as the gospel—the message of God's good news—then the gospel *of* Jesus is not *about* Jesus but instead about what God is doing to create a new reality, a new configuration, a new community in the world. And it follows, then, that his disciples will not so much believe *in* Jesus but instead choose to believe what he proclaims, what he demonstrates, what he embodies *about* God's intention for and God's action in the world.

Here the faith *in* God and the faith-practice grounded *in what God is doing* has its primary source in what the Chosen One of God proclaims, demonstrates and embodies. The combination of this proclamation, demonstration and embodiment is evidence both about the nature and character of God and about the new reality God is already introducing into the world. The presence of that new reality is apprehended in Jesus' acts of compassion and healing, of care for the poor and marginalized, of self-giving for the sake of mutual love in the new community. The consequence of believing Jesus in his proclamation and his action is, in faith-practice, to join with him in the new community he demonstrates and embodies, even in his sacrificial death for the salvation of others and for the sake of God's new community. Jesus' resurrection is not just the confirmation of his cause of a Community of Love but is also its continuing witness to, and embodiment in, the life of the world.

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I contend that the earliest witness we have about Jesus in the Synoptic gospels points us to the second of these alternatives. The 14th and 15th verses of that same first chapter in Mark prove crucial, at least for me, in this choice:

Now after John (the Baptist) was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming *the good news of God*, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the *kingdom of God* has come near; *repent and believe in the good news*."

What difference does it make theologically and socio-ethically?

I acknowledge that those who favor the preposition "about" in the first verse of Mark can also opt to be involved in issues of social justice based on their faith in Jesus Christ. But there is plenty of historical and contemporary evidence that the strictly personal relationship between the believer and Jesus-as-the-object-of-faith can lead the believer to an indifference and even, in some cases, an objection to participation in movements for social justice as an essential ingredient of Christian faith.

That isn't possible for those who believe Jesus' words and actions about the God of love who is working to re-create the world in keeping with God's own nature. Believing Jesus means accepting the invitation to join with God in the re-creation of the world through the instruments of reconciliation and justice. The very nature of the Christian faith and life is accepting and living out that invitation as a disciple of Jesus.

A lot turns on the choice of a preposition.