

The Letters of the Apostle Paul

The Letters of the Apostle Paul:

Controversies and Consequences

By

Charles Vergeer

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In literature we give no guarantees, let alone results, but create openings and gaps, provide tryouts, present contemporary views. And then there is our own rapid oblivion.

Kees Fens

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INTRODUCTION

WITH THE SWORD

In the introduction to her book *SPQR: A history of ancient Rome*, Mary Beard writes. ‘It is a dangerous myth, that we are better historians than our predecessors. We are not. But, (...) we come with different priorities that make the ancient past speak to us in a new idiom’¹.

We do not know for certain, but possibly the Nazarene – known to us as Jesus Christ, his real name is unknown – attempted to establish the kingdom of God on earth and take as the Davidic the crown and throne of Judea. At the time Paul must have dismissed this as an impossible and criminal pretension and, ordered by the high priests, persecuted his followers. In his letters from the AD 50’s of the first century, he shows himself to be a herald of the Anointed but to be in conflict with the relatives and followers, in conflict with ‘the Rock’ and the brother of the Anointed. Paul attempts to found his own congregations at Ephesus, Corinth and several other Greek-Roman cities. But again and again he gets entangled with disputes and conflict with the other already existing Christian-Jewish congregations in Antioch and Jerusalem. In this fierce conflict he is finally defeated and after four years of imprisonment beheaded in Rome. Owing to the fact that the mother congregations in Jerusalem and Judea have more or less disappeared as a result of the Jewish revolt and war, there are new opportunities and in the AD 90’s an extensively adapted and rewritten edition of Paul’s letters was made.

Again and again there is what Heinz Kohut calls a ‘rearrangement of the self’. The daily reality of the congregations in the 30’s, the 50’s and the 90’s of the first century AD altered rapidly and was obscured by later narratives, truths of faith, and ways of representation. In later centuries, this manifold array of interpretations just after the death of the Anointed disappeared behind and under the homogenising process carried out by the diverse Christian religious groups.

¹ Mary Beard: *SPQR: A history of ancient Rome*. London, New York 2015, p. 13.

The story as it is told in the Acts of the Apostles is the only source we have concerning the early expansion of the faith. As a result the life and teachings of Paul were mainly understood in the light of that text. But Paul's letters, dating from the years AD 49-55 are older and possibly more authentic than The Acts of the Apostles, which appeared many years later. Underneath all the changes, differences and disputes, the same main theme can be heard: the longing for salvation and redemption, for the coming of the king, the saviour. This 'theme' will be further discussed in the first introductory chapter.

This longing for redemption and the coming of the king was shared by all kinds of groups: the large party of the Pharisees, but also by the priest and high priests, the baptists in the deserts and the supporters of the Galileans. The Dutch church historian Cees den Heyer has written a fascinating three volume study about messianism, the yearning for salvation and redemption.

The first part of this book concerns itself with the collection of Paul's letters. The reader is well advised to read Paul's letters in the bible, parallel to this text with annotations, to read them, scribble in the margins and cross out words, sentences or verses.

The letter to the Galatians contains a remarkable piece of Paul's autobiography, an account of his own life and activities that differs considerably from what is said about him in Acts. The letter to the Galatians shows that apart from a continuation of the tradition in the early congregations there are clear signs of discord. There is a much discussed break with the congregation at Jerusalem directly, almost bluntly expressed by Paul which was later on covered by the cloak of charity in Acts.

In subsequent chapters, in which the correspondence with the congregations at Corinth, Thessaloniki and Philippi is looked at critically, we gain more and more insight into the profound role that the editors of the AD 90's played in the publication of Paul's letters. Through this a second voice grabs hold of the text, that of the editor, relevant to the situation half a century after the actual activities of Paul. It may come across as a great loss, the authentic voice of Paul, his words and his letter texts are lost. It is clear we are no longer reading Paul's letters, but an edited version, modified and supplemented after his death. But we can also read them through the eyes of the readers of the nineties and thus become more aware of the intentions of the editors. For example, Paul had full authority in his own congregations and had no need to stress his apostolic authority

time and again. But owing to the destruction of the temple and city, the near annihilation of the mother congregation in Jerusalem and Judea, the disappearance of the authoritative relatives and main followers of the Anointed, the church of the AD 90's, that more or less decapitated community, had an urgent need for authority.

The editors of the AD 90's continually emphasise the apostolic authority of Paul and do so quite elaborately. Paul himself is remarkably humble about his authority: *ouk eimi hikanos kaleisthai apostolos*, 'I am (...) unworthy to be called an apostle'². Paul does not use the word *axios*, 'worth', but *hikanos*: I strive for it, but for me it –the apostolate– remains out of reach. Mockingly he calls himself *ho elachistos tōn apostolōn*, the least of the apostles. In Latin his name can be translated as 'the small, minor one'. *Paulus minimum est*. But it is doubtful whether Paul, who spoke Aramaic and Greek and probably no Latin, was aware of this possible pun.

Apart from the question as to which texts of Paul are genuine and which were wrongly attributed to him in later years, the question arises whether we should read the texts as an edition of Paul's letters or as an editorial composition where a lot of material was used, including quite garbled and reworked excerpts from the letters. Should we read the text through the eyes of the readers of the AD 50's at Corinth, or should we read them through the eyes of the faithful of half a century later who were spread over a larger part of the world?

In the second part of this study we try to read the letters in the way mentioned above. (a) Firstly we take the historical aspect into consideration. We will try to show the different ways of looking at the text at different periods in history. (b) We will attempt to 'read' and interpret the letters in the way the first readers may have done. The letter to the congregation at Philippi contains a hymn which may even predate the letter and may have retained the first declarations of faith uttered in the AD 30's and 40's.

In the first letter to the congregation at Corinth, Paul preaches the formula of the resurrection in the form it had reached him. In the sermon that Paul held in Athens, the points of faith are presented in a manner which had been developed in the decades after the death of Paul. To attribute all these texts to Paul would make him unreadable and incomprehensible. In these

² I Corinthians 15, 9.

texts it is possible to trace the early development of the 'Christian' faith, throughout the AD 30's, then through Paul into the AD 50's and through the reflection on the Pauline way of thinking into the AD 90's.

In the third part of this study we again attempt to read the texts through different eyes. Here we deal with Acts and try to show how differently these texts were read in the 19th, the 20th and 21st centuries. Various elements were picked up in the same text. It is surprising to see how during the last few decades those texts of nearly two thousand years ago are interpreted quite differently than they were fifty years ago. And this is a result not entirely due to purely philological and exegetical techniques.

In the fourth part of this book Paul's letter to the Romans is discussed. Paul had nothing to do with most of it, neither was it addressed to the Romans. Yet, it is in a way the culmination of the influence exerted by Paul. Nowhere else can we find the tension of his faith, the expectation in which he lived, so magnificently put into words in the letter to the Romans: 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'³

Creation 'was subjected to futility', but it is not without hope '[it] will be set free from its bondage to corruption (...)'. 'The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.' We do not have words for this and are unable to say anything about it. How could we? But, 'the Spirit intercedes for us with – *stenagmois alalètois* – groanings to deep for words.'⁴

In Hebrew the name of God, Yahweh, the tetragram, was written, but it was forbidden to utter this name. In the Jewish religion this was done by using different indications: the Name; the Living One; the One; the Eternal. Or the form of address '*Abba*' was used. This word is normally translated as 'father', such as in the Lord's Prayer; 'Our Father'. However, whereas the most important Greek and Roman gods Zeus and Jupiter could be addressed as 'god the father', the Jewish form of address was the salutation of a child: 'dad', 'papa'.

When a text from the Old Testament was read out in Hebrew and the reader came across the word JHWJ, he would not read the unmentionable name, but would say *Adonai*, 'the Lord'. In the Greek translation of the

³ Romans 8, 18.

⁴ Romans 8, 18-26.

Old Testament, the Hebrew *Adonai* was translated by *(ho) Kurios*, ‘(the) Lord’. People speaking Greek would also use this word to address men in daily life.

In Paul’s texts, it is seldom clear whether by *(ho) Kurios* he meant God or Jesus, nor whether the referring pronoun *autos* refers to Him (God) or him (Jesus). As a result of dogmatic developments it became possible to write and talk about the Lord God, the Father and the Lord God, the Son, Jesus. But, these developments, as I point out, occurred long after Paul’s death. For Paul himself, it would be sacrilege to consider the son equal to the Father.

But from the first centuries AD it often remained vague who was meant. I have therefore opted for an unusual solution by using higher and lower case letters respectively. When in the text God, Yahweh, is meant, I write the ‘Lord’ and ‘Him’ or ‘His’, while when in the text Jesus is meant I write the ‘lord’, and ‘him’ or ‘his’ and the ‘son’ with a lower case. I hope it is unnecessary to point out that I do so in an attempt to provide clarity and certainly not with any intention to cause offence.

I

TEXT

CHAPTER ONE

THE KING IS NOW HERE

a. The prologue

The text of the gospel of Mark derives its momentum from its inherent sense of expectation. Mark narrates with rapid pen strokes, at no point allowing his story to be interrupted by unnecessary digressions as he continually wants to get on with it. In later years the end of his gospel was redacted by various editors. Varying accounts of the resurrection and appearances of the lord were added, which quite spoil the fluency of his tale. At the end of his gospel the expectations are fulfilled by His presence and by the presence of the women who ‘fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them’¹.

Faith, church doctrine and theology developed and so, out of one word: *ègerthè*, ‘was awakened’ grew the idea of the resurrection and Christ’s appearances after his death; be it as an ephemeral spirit or in the flesh, his body covered with wounds; the eating of fried fish and his ascension into heaven after forty days. The question is justified whether all these alterations at the end of Mark’s gospel, enrich or diminish the original faith.

Also at the beginning of the gospel of Mark is the work of subsequent editors still visible. In my book: *Marcus, de man met de verminkte vingers*², I devoted an entire chapter to all the questions raised by Mark 1, 1 ‘The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God’, the title of his gospel. This title verse, which occurs in two variations in the various manuscripts, must be a later addition. The gospel of Mark begins with the traditional formula: ‘As it is written in Isaiah the Prophet.’ – *tōi èsaia tōi profètèi* – (Mark 1, 2). Then follows the quotation and its interpretation. This doubling of the *dativus tōi* is odd and, judging by many of the surviving manuscripts, should be omitted. We then simply get – ‘As

¹ Mark 16, 8.

² Charles Vergeer: *Marcus. De man met de verminkte vingers*. Budel 2010.

written by Isaiah the prophet'. Origen commented on the fact, that what follows immediately after verse 2 is not a quotation from Isaiah. Verse 2 was derived from Exodus 23, 20 and the prophet Malachi 3, 1. Not until the second part of the citation, verse 3, there is a quotation from Isaiah 40, 3. This was criticised by Porphyry, whose criticism was rebutted by Jerome.

I would like to make four observations: firstly, Mark does not quote from the Hebrew text of the bible, but from the Greek translation, the Septuagint, something Paul did as well. It is clear that Paul could write in Hebrew and Aramaic, but in all likelihood his followers in Corinth and Ephesus no longer did so. We know that Mark used Aramaic on several occasions; but did he also understand Hebrew? We do not know, but we do know that when the texts of the prophets were read in the synagogues in Rome in AD 71, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text was used.

Secondly, as a consequence of this, we may conclude that the 'unannounced' quotation from Malachi was added later by an editor. It is the only quotation from the Old Testament which was taken from the original Hebrew text and not from the Septuagint. It is an interpolation in the text, perhaps a gloss from the margin of a manuscript of the text, which diminishes somewhat the impressive authentic beginning of Mark's gospel: *phōnè boōntos en tèi erēmōi*, 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord' (1, 3).

Thirdly, it is obvious that neither Mark nor his editors hesitate to adapt the holy texts of the Old Testament according to their needs. Not only are two prophets quoted together, but the text is made to fit. In verse 2, the word *sou* is doubled and in the quotation from Isaiah the author replaces *tou theou hēmōn* simply by *autou*.

And finally it is surprising to see the result of the 'purified' text. It is quite consistent: Verse 2a 'as is written in Isaiah, (...)' is immediately followed by the text about the loud voice of God in the desert. Then there is John in the desert, baptising. Then we have the baptism of Jesus and again the loud voice of God, and finally Jesus in the desert. With the use of only a few key words a chain has been forged and a meaningful coherent text created. With this the additions to the text betray themselves as the work of later editors: the quotation in verse 2b comes across as an early Christian attempt to interpret the text. And verse 1, the title 'The beginning of the gospel' is skilfully echoed at the end of this passage, both in verses 14 and 15.

However the most important observations to be made are not derived from the form of the text, but from its content. The title concerns Jesus Christ, the son of God. In the interpolation of verse 2b the theme of the coming of the messiah makes its appearance. In verse 11 God loudly proclaims: 'You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased'. And finally Jesus himself speaks about his mission: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand' (verse 15). Like John, he calls people to repentance because of the kingdom of God (verses 4 and 15).

It is not difficult to understand all of this as something eschatological, the promise of the coming of salvation. But, the related themes – conversion; repentance; messiah; son of God and kingdom of the lord get so entangled and intertwined with the original text that they depict more the early-Christian attempts to accommodate some Jewish concepts into the story. The original account of what really happened in the desert of Judea in the late AD 20's of the first century is hidden between all these additions and is nearly lost. In any case, it is clear that the key word 'desert' (never mind what Isaiah meant with it) had a very actual content.

Those who withdrew into the desert, little more than a day's journey from Jerusalem, showed by this act that they were averse to the things going on in the holy city and the temple. The will of the Eternal was no longer obeyed in the city and temple. The Romans were the foreign godless occupiers of the holy land, while the collaborating house of Herod – Idumeans – together with high priests they arbitrarily appointed and deposed, were all regarded as a collective abomination. Only in the freedom of the desert was the will of the Eternal kept in honour. The aversion to the rule of the foreign invaders and their accomplices and of the high priests, who depended on them, instead of the Lord, ensured that only in the desert would the will of God be obeyed. In the desert the paths were straight for the just and the just were averse to the crooked bypaths and injustice that prevailed in the temple and city. The Romans did not venture into the desert, but the king did act against this threat and by means of a military expedition John the Baptist fell into his hands and was beheaded. By this event we can date the beginning of the gospel of Mark: AD 29.

The supporters of the Baptist were certainly not all purely convinced of the peaceful road to the kingdom of God. The Barjonim, Sicarians and Zealots who had joined their ranks were resilient and were not hesitant about using violence. The name with which they adorned themselves can be heard in the beginning of the story of Mark: 'Prepare the Way of the Lord.' Jesus

would identify himself with them – ‘I am the Way’³ - and well into the AD 50’s, the Romans called this rebellious Jewish movement, ‘the Way’⁴.

The three themes of Mark – the desert; ‘the Way’ and the Kingdom of God belong together. Only in the desert is His voice still heard and obeyed, and only in the desert do people walk on the straight ‘way’ which involves the observance of His government and the coming of His kingdom. There are two other themes present: the theme of the son of God and that of the messiah. These are the themes that reflect historical reality and faith, but they will only play their part in the development of the faith in the earliest era of Christianity. That many Jews looked forward to, desperately longed for, the coming of the messiah is beyond any doubt. But it is highly questionable whether Jesus considered himself to be the messiah or that others believed him to be so during his lifetime. The same can be said regarding the title ‘son of God’. Sometimes there are things that seem so close and similar that they appear almost identical. Yet they remain separate. Let us briefly put forward our views in these matters and after that consider the main theme, the coming of the kingdom.

1. Jesus was a believing Jew, a convinced monotheist. If he ever used titles such as ‘son of God’, then he certainly did not use them in the pagan sense, in the way that the Emperor Augustus officially named himself son of the deified Julius Caesar and let himself be worshipped as such. Neither did Jesus use it in the later evolved Christian meaning, in which speaking about the son of God implicated a *Deus trinus*, one God in three appearances: Father, Son and Spirit. Perhaps he regarded this title as befitting a very pious man, or that he knew it as a messianic title. But that he allowed himself to be addressed with the high title son of God is impossible. Even Mark only uses this high title in a structural sense. That is, he first puts this high title in the heading of his gospel and then he interrupts his story six times to make room for this evocation, which is subsequently concealed and contradicted.
2. All too easily and too often is the connection made between messiah and Anointed. Perhaps it is influenced by the much later gospel of John, where it is said that Jesus is the messiah and ‘the messiah cometh of the seed of David and from Bethlehem’⁵. In the gospel of John, which was written around AD 100, probably at

³ John 14, 6.

⁴ Acts 24, 22.

⁵ John 7, 40-42.

Ephesus, the author does not hesitate to allow Jesus, albeit in a challenging way, to call himself the messiah and son of God. In doing this, John gives the theology of his time an impressive image, but he completely bypasses the historical Jesus of almost a century earlier. There is no convincing indication that around AD 30 Jesus regarded himself as the messiah, or that his followers saw and addressed him as such. However, after his death, this title of fulfilled expectation was given to him.

3. The Greek translation of 'messiah' could indeed be *ho Christos*, the Anointed, and as the hereditary prince of the royal house of David, Jesus strived to be anointed as king of the Jews, or king of Judea. He was actually named both the chosen Anointed, and the anointed king of Judea and as such, convicted and put to death⁶. Obviously, in the text of Mark, this anointing of Jesus as king was given an entirely different meaning. What, for Jesus was the fulfilment of his life-long aspirations, resulted in a failure within a matter of hours. And his attempt to become king was seen as a crime by the Romans. In the decades after his death, the AD 30's and 40's, the dispute about the importance and meaning of this anointing became for Paul in Antioch the reason to call 'the followers of the Way' henceforth 'the faithful' to the God-approved anointing, i.e. 'Christians'⁷. Also in the widely spread Jewish communities, the disputes centred on the legality of the anointing⁸.

The later Christian interpretation of the beginning of Mark's gospel that has continued up to the present day is that John the Baptist was a forerunner of Jesus, someone who announced Jesus as the expected messiah. However, this is not the case. 'Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist.'⁹ This is the garment made from animal skins, the *tunicae pellicae* which God had made for Adam¹⁰. The first man was naked and covered his sin and shame with a fig leaf. But God takes this covering of shame from him and clothes the man and his wife in this *tunicae pellicae* as a visible token of the future return to paradise, the advent of the coming kingdom of God.

⁶ Mark 8, 29; 14, 1-9 and 15, 26.

⁷ Acts 11, 26.

⁸ Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 21, 4; Tacitus, *Annales* XV, 44; Flavius Josephus: *Ant. Jud.* XVIII, 61 and 64 and XX, 200.

⁹ Mark 1, 6.

¹⁰ Genesis 3, 21.

Then Mark continues: ‘And he [John] preached, saying: “After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie” ’¹¹. This far stronger being is of course no man, but the all-powerful God himself. The coming of His kingdom is being announced here. And that is what Jesus is doing and what is meant with his first words: ‘He [Jesus] said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” ’¹². These are the first words of Jesus in the direct form, preceded by *hoti*. *Kairos* is not ‘time’ but the right or favourable moment, the moment at which what was expected to happen. ‘Is fulfilled’ in Greek is a *perfectum*, which indicates that the fulfillment or achievement of something is completed. The significance of this well-known slogan so weakened in translation is not ‘the time is fulfilled’ but ‘now is the moment’, ‘now the measure is full!’ And *èngiken* is the perfectum of *engizō*, ‘to approach’ and therefore does not mean ‘the kingdom of God is near’ but ‘here and now is the kingdom’, ‘now the kingdom of God is here’.

What connects the two figures, John and Jesus, or rather, the two figures connected by Mark, is the desert. Four times the word ‘desert’ is used in the first chapter of Mark, first in the quotation from Isaiah: ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’ (1, 3); then ‘John [appeared] in the wilderness’ (1 4) and lastly, twice about Jesus: ‘the Spirit [drove] him into the wilderness’ (1, 12) and ‘Forty days in the wilderness’ (1, 13). Every Jew understood the desert and the ‘forty days’ as referring to the wandering of the Israelites with the ark of the covenant under the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night; it was a peregrination that took forty anticipatory years, culminating in the entry into the promised land. The kingdom given by God was here after the long journey through the desert. Promise and expectations were fulfilled.

Texts are like paintings, covered over the centuries by layers of dirt, paint and varnishes, rain and soot and mould. These layers that many readers spread over them must be removed in order to restore to view the original meaning. The message of John and Jesus is: at this moment the kingdom of God has come. Subsequent layers - John is the forerunner of Christ, Jesus is the messiah and the son of God - prevent us from reading this message.

¹¹ Mark 1, 7.

¹² Mark 1, 15.

b. The Kingdom of god

The importance of the kingdom of God is best formulated in the battle hymn of the Way: The Lord's Prayer. Our Father, He who is the ruler in heaven now also rules here on earth. 'Thy kingdom has come, now your will also dominates on earth!' The somewhat flat translation 'the kingdom of God' does not do justice to the Greek: *hè basileia* is not a political situation or arrangement. It would be more accurate to translate it as 'the royal rule'. *Hè basileia tou theou* does not infer that God rules and reigns in heaven, neither does it imply eschatological expectations regarding the coming salvation, but it does state that now the royal dominion given by God has taken shape (at least for His people and in His country). That this implied a conflict with the foreign, Roman, occupier and the ruling alien royal family of Herod was clear and inescapable.

Paul expresses the universal reign of God most poignantly in the formula *hina hèi ho theos panta en pasin*, 'that God may be all in all'¹³. It is the total theocracy, which would nowadays be regarded as fundamentalism. The expectation was that the sceptre of Jacob would prevail and that the Jewish hero, the Davidic, would come, He who re-established the royal dominion of Yahweh over His people and over all the peoples was the nucleus of Jewish eschatology. The young man, Emmanuel, would come as a liberator¹⁴. Dating from the days when David was king, Yahweh bore the title *melek*, king of Zion. In the psalms the singing was filled with the passionate longing for the coming of the Kingdom.

In the psalms and in the prophets, the royal title *melek*, (King God) is used, and the specific title *malak* Yahweh, is customary. Yahweh is being called or invoked as *malki* and his royal dominion is mentioned as *malkuth Jahwe*. In the Greek of the Septuagint we read *basileia tou theou*. The establishment of this dominion implies, both for Isaiah¹⁵ and for the supporters of Paul in the letter to the Romans that 'He creates a new heaven and a new earth.'

In the Old Testament there is no mention or hardly any of life after death, of resurrection or resurrection from the dead. In the prophets there is only one short sentence in Isaiah: 'Your dead shall live; their bodies shall

¹³ I Corinthians 15, 28.

¹⁴ Isaiah 7, 14-16.

¹⁵ Isaiah 65, 17.

rise'¹⁶. The text is highly unusual: through it we can make the following observations: in the first place, with 'Your dead' the dead of Yahweh is meant. 'Your dead' on the other hand, refers to those dead of other nations, the enemies, who 'will know no more life.' Secondly, in the New Testament in Mark the awakening from the dead is connected to the judgment by God. And thirdly: probably a later editor added the text 'He will swallow up death in victory'¹⁷ to the prophecy. Paul picks up this victory slogan again in his letter to the Corinthians: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'¹⁸

Again and again we encounter the pivot of the texts and stories; it is where the Jewish meanings were covered over by the later 'Christianised' layers of meaning that were new and different. The understanding of the texts by the original audience was quickly overtaken by new ways of reading and understanding. Through this, the faithful expectation of the Jews that God's dominion of the heavens would descend into his kingdom of Zion was obscured.

The Jews believed that He would then demonstrate his power over life and death and would pronounce his judgment, by His Word, His messiah. This messiah was replaced for the son and the Word, to the decisive actions of Jesus Christ. Anyone who is willing to read the texts carefully will come across several indications of this reversal. At the royal entrance of Jesus in the holy city, Mark has the people calling 'Hosanna' and 'Blessed is the coming kingdom' and then again 'Hosanna in the highest'¹⁹.

To us this might look like a kind of jubilant cry: 'Hooray, long may he live!' It was a crying out meant as support for Jesus and uttered out of enthusiasm for his coup, or whatever we may call this attempt to become king of Judea or the Jews. However, the text of Marcus is absolutely clear, quite different from the deforming variants given by the other evangelists. Both Hosannas do not concern the man Jesus, but Him, Yahweh, He who will deliver His people.

The first Hosanna is doubly legitimized by twice linking 'blessed' to 'The Coming'. The structure then becomes as follows:

¹⁶ Isaiah 26, 19.

¹⁷ Isaiah 25, 8.

¹⁸ I Corinthians 15, 54-55.

¹⁹ Mark 11, 9-10.

Hosanna:

Blessed - the coming - in (the) Name of (the) Lord (God)

Blessed - the coming – kingdom of our Father.

The second Hosanna is translated in the ESV²⁰ as ‘Hosanna in the highest!’ But what the Greek text says is *Hōsanna en tois hupsistois* - Hosanna in the highest heavens. Here the title of the Eternal is used *hupsistos*. Plato used this word centuries earlier as an indication for the highest, most exalted God. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which was used by Mark, he had read this word as the usual indication for God. Hosanna is a prayer formula addressed to Yahweh. *Hoši'a*, ‘save’, *hoši'eni*, ‘save me’ or *hoši'enu* ‘save us’! These are the cries occurring in the Old Testament, all addressed to Yahweh as king of Zion. They are cries of begging for salvation, deliverance. After all, no man is able to do this on his own: ‘And he (Yahweh, the king of His land and people) will redeem Israel.’²¹

This cry of the people of Jerusalem during the royal entrance already perplexed the Roman governor. In the, highly dubious, texts of the *Acta Pilati* the governor Pontius Pilate has his *cursor* (adjutant) make inquiries about that incomprehensible ‘Hosanna’. The *cursor* returns with the answer that ‘Hosanna’ as cried out by the Jews meant *sōson dè*: ‘set us free now’!

The threefold calling of the Highest – (a) the Name of God, (b) the kingship of Our Father and (c) the Supreme – is interrupted in our text with a remarkable sample of text corruption. For the second evocation does not seem to be directed to God, addressed as Our Father, but, as in the ESV and in most translations: ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’ That is bizarre for several reasons. First of all, no Jew would ever talk about ‘our father David’; it is a turn of phrase that occurs nowhere else. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, yes, they could be addressed – and were – addressed as ‘our father’. What is involved here, is the belief in, the hope and expectation of the royal reign of God, and not the return to a restored monarchy of a thousand years ago, nor the return to the days and the power of David. No believing Jew would attach any importance to the latter nor was there any place for that within their faith or within their eschatological expectations.

²⁰ In this book I use the English Standard Version (ESV) as reference, unless otherwise stated.

²¹ Psalm 130, 8.

It is not difficult to understand how and why the name of David ended up into the text. In the third century AD the text of Mark was edited and reviewed at least three times. This was done in view of the then more authoritative text of Matthew. In the gospel of Matthew the evocation *Hosanna* was interpreted much more in the Christian meaning and his text contains as an addition after the first Hosanna: *tōi huōi Daueid*²². Can it be established without any doubt that the insertion of the name David is a later corruption of the text of Mark? No, not with absolute certainty, but the indications for it are strong:

- a. There are many other examples in the text of Mark where fragments – words and sentences – from the text of Matthew are inserted.
- b. The addition of the name of David renders the text actually incomprehensible and unbelievable, at least for the Jews who were supposed to have evoked the name.
- c. It would however, make the text more understandable for later Christians who believed, not in God's royal dominion, but in Jesus Christ as the saviour.
- d. On the other hand the text is very clear without the insert 'David' as part of the threefold invocation of Salvation by the Highest.
- e. In fact Mark himself uses the name of David a bit further on in his text and always spells the name as *Dauid*. But in the text of Matthew the spelling *Daueid* is used. It is an adaptation of the name which was copied unthinkingly by the editors. It is the only time that the name appears spelled like this in the text of Mark and in doing so shows up as evidence of the intervention in the text.

Another, similar, example is the oldest evocation of the church. In the present day, the liturgy remains the threefold evocation for mercy, the only Greek text retained amongst the Latin: Kyrie.

Lord have mercy (upon us)
 Christ have mercy
 Lord have mercy.

Contemporary churchgoers know who Christ is and in all probability will also consider Jesus in this mentioning of the lord. 'Mercy' is a word that nowadays is probably understood mainly as granting forgiveness. The meaning of the Greek verb used here: *luō* is very vague, yet it always

²² Matthew 21, 9.

contains ‘disconnecting’, ‘loosening of restrictive bonds’ and in this case should be translated more accurately as ‘deliver us’, or ‘save us’.

Ever since the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, *kurios* has been used as the word for ‘the Lord’, the appellation referring to God. In Paul’s letters the word is used to indicate both God as well as the lord, Christ. Paul, incidentally will have addressed the men in the street as *Kurie*. The two evocations, however, do not address Jesus, but they implore the Eternal to come to the aid of his people and to deliver them from the oppressors. Neither is *Christos eleison* directed to Jesus but to the Anointed of God. Repeatedly we find in Isaiah the prayer formula directed to God: *chonnenu* (and *chonneni*) ‘deliver us’²³. Just like Hosanna the threefold ‘Sanctus’, can only relate to the Holy One himself, God.

c. The coming

Judaism, Christianity and Islam do not exist as such but are unities which in reality encompass a colourful array of internally quarrelling and conflicting groups. Of course there were Jews who were looking forward to the restoration of the royal house of David. But the majority of the pious Jews expected that it would be Yahweh who would restore his royal dominion over His land and His people. In order to do this, He would send His Anointed, which was quite different from placing one’s hope and expectations on a man, a descendant of the royal house of David, who would come to liberate his people from the foreign yoke and to restore the kingdom of David.

The pious Jews longed for the royal dominion of Yahweh. Some of them set their expectations on the coming of the Lord’s Anointed and among them were some who believed that this messiah would be a descendant from the royal house of David. Once God’s dominion on earth would be established, His judgment, whether on the last day or not, would be a sign of it. In Mark it is not the messiah who judges, but God.

Also in Paul’s letters it is God himself who will appear enthroned on the last day and pass His judgement²⁴. But already in the letters attributed to him after his death, the judgment, the coming and the kingdom are no longer interpreted within a Jewish but within a Christian tradition and thus placed into the power of Jesus, ‘I charge you in the presence of God and of

²³ Isaiah 30, 18.

²⁴ Romans 14, 10 and I Corinthians 4, 5.

Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom'²⁵. It is quite obvious that this 'I' cannot possibly be Paul.

What is also quite fascinating is the reworted ending of the first letter to the Corinthians by later editors. It ends with: 'All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss'. Then the familiar forgers' formula: 'I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand'²⁶. It is skilfully forged together by the repetition of 'greeting', but follows a curious trajectory: *Ho aspasastmos (...) Paulou* and ignores that in the previous verse Paul prescribed the greeting to be a kiss and not a handwritten signing.

However, at the bottom of the roll of papyrus or parchment a bit of space was very often left for additions. And there, indeed, after the end of the text in Mark 16, 8 appear many editorial additions. In I Corinthians too, three additions appear after the signing (I Corinthians 16, 21-24). The second one is a benediction, the third a prayer of love, but the first one is a curse: 'If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed! *Maranatha!* (Our Lord, come!) (16, 22). With the addition of the other two benedictions, the first evocation changes from being Jewish to being Christian. And the Lord (*Kurios*), changes from God into Jesus Christ. But the old evocation, 'a thundering voice in the wilderness' is *Maran atha*. Since Jerome this has been worked into a Christian evocation: *Dominus Noster (Iesum Christum) venit*, but the Jews meant 'our Lord [God] come!' It is the lament as an expression of the expectation of the arrival of the royal dominion of Yahweh. The coming king is God Himself, and His kingdom of God *malkuth 'elohim* is the coming kingdom of God, *hè basileia tou theou*, which was also longed for by John and Jesus.

In Paul it is often impossible to determine whether he means God or His Anointed. Such as in the triumphant statement: 'Now the lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the lord is, there is freedom.' *Ho de kurios to pneuma estin hou de to pneuma kuriou, eleutheria*²⁷. This is certainly a later interpolation. This later Christian interpretation supposes the lord to be Christ and thereby encounters inexplicable problems because the second and third person of God are being mixed up here or because Jesus Christ is only perceived as spirit, *pneuma*. But this sentence is an explanation of the previous verse, one of the most crucial for the faith of

²⁵ II Timothy 4, 1.

²⁶ I Corinthians 16, 20 and 16, 22.

²⁷ II Corinthians 3, 17.

Paul, a quotation from the book Exodus: ‘But whenever one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed’. And looked at in this way, it is quite clear that here *ho kurios* is God (Yahweh).

For Paul, the pious Jew, it is simply unimaginable and unacceptable that the Lord (God Yahweh) would be identical to the lord (His Anointed, Christ Jesus). The Lord is the Eternal God, whose Anointed is a man. And a human being, even if he is the Anointed by God, the messiah does not live on in eternity. ‘Then comes the end – *eita to telos* –, when he [the messiah] delivers the kingdom to God the Father.²⁸

d. The King

The New Testament is a conglomeration of quite different and often contradictory writings dating from a turbulent time. In the light of what I have argued above, let’s have a look at the different chronological layers.

- a. There are hardly any traces left of the original movement, ‘the Way’, (‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’) among whose members were John and Jesus, Simon and James, the Baptist and the Anointed, the Rock and the Brother of the Anointed, and of the ‘Mother Church’ (we are aware of the anachronism) of Jerusalem and Judea as well. What we have is little more than some evocations, exclamations that are sometimes unintelligible and often distorted. Practically nothing is left about the expectations of the lord, his relatives and first followers. They were persecuted, murdered and silenced.
- b. A second, and for us the oldest, layer is Paul’s voice in the Greek world in the AD 50’s. At first he was a persecutor of the oldest congregation, then he became a converted man viewed with suspicion; immediately after his conversion he left the scene going to Arabia for three years. He once more appeared in Jerusalem but was subsequently sent into exile. After a number of years he was recalled to the holy city after which he went to Antioch and began his missionary work. In AD 55 he was recalled yet again to Jerusalem to account for his actions. There he was condemned, first by the brother of the Anointed, James, then by the Sanhedrin, then by the Roman governor and finally in the name of the emperor himself. Around AD 59 Paul was beheaded just outside Rome and

²⁸ I Corinthians 15, 24.

his congregations, in Ephesus and especially in Corinth, were isolated.

- c. But three years later, in AD 62, during the months of waiting for the newly appointed governor, the brother of the Anointed, James, was also slain in Jerusalem. Then the rebellion broke out and the war with the Romans, resulting in the destruction of city, country and temple, and the slaughter of the first congregation of relatives and followers.
- d. Another new voice came to be heard in this wilderness of anger and despair. Not in Judea, nor in the Jewish communities in Greek cities, but in Rome, the city of the victor. In the spring of AD 72 it was there that Mark read out for the first time his gospel, his good news, his heraldic message about victory over death. It was meant to be heard by his despairing fellow believers, the Jewish community in Rome, who had heard how the holy city of Jerusalem had been conquered and destroyed. How the temple, the house of the Lord, had been burnt and razed to the ground. How their God had forsaken them, His house, His land and His people. They had heard how more than a million fellow countrymen had been killed and tens of thousands taken as slaves, to work in the mines or to be whipped to death in the theatres for the convenience and entertainment of the audience.

They had witnessed the victory triumph through the streets of Rome acclaimed by a million spectators. They had seen how the Jewish prisoners of war were worn down, being forced to build the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol, the temple of Peace and the Coliseum. Fathers no longer knew the answer to their sons' question at Passover, 'Why do we celebrate the feast of the Exodus, the liberation from slavery in Egypt?' And then Mark came with his liberating victory message: He rules, beyond the boundaries of life and death and raised His faithful from the dead!

- e. That message, a comparatively short text and one moreover that would soon disappear from being the centre of attention, made room for a Jewish sect to become a world-wide religion. The story took hold and within twenty years it was followed by the more expanded gospels of Matthew and Luke and the story of the oldest congregation: Acts. In Acts the story is told of this oldest congregation, the one in Jerusalem led by Simon the Rock and the brother of the lord, James (his role was concealed) but in a completely rewritten version. And then, especially in the second half of Acts, Paul came back on the scene.

- f. This led to perhaps the most important layer of the New Testament, the reissue in Ephesus of the AD 90's of the letters of Paul; these consisted of partly authentic material, partly from mildly-adapted to extensively-altered material and partly of material written by authors using Paul's name; these editors are generally referred to as deutero-Pauline authors. This nameless group of Jews who were working in the Greek capital of Asia, Ephesus have left a huge mark on the development of early Christianity.
- g. It was also in Ephesus that the figure of John and the group around him came to the fore. Not only by his fourth gospel, but also with his emphasis on love, the incarnation and incorporating the term *Logos* he ensured a great future for the religion.
- h. Finally the pièce de resistance – an introduction to the collections of letters from Paul and the texts attributed to him. After the failed attempt, the letter to the congregation at Colossae, the improved version 'to the saints' appeared, later renamed as the letter to the Ephesians. But the great composition of the letter to the Jews, the Hebrews, put the icing on the cake. Here the fully developed theology did not only unite the two movements at work in Ephesus, the deutero-Paulines and the group around John, but also led to a form of completion. This in turn was soon neglected because the letter to the Romans attributed to Paul and put together out of a diversity of material, was presented as an introduction.
- i. And here we would seem to come to the next, ninth phase, while actually the New Testament ended with a series of late, Catholic letters and the bizarre, written in bad Greek *Apocalypse*.

These nine layers are only partly separate from one another, largely the result of internecine struggles, resistance and a great deal of contradiction. This resulted in the demand for the processing, adapting and smoothing of the texts. There are not many texts that have been as thoroughly corrupted as those which form the New Testament. Of course, dead texts are left alone, living texts are being picked up, read out, studied, discussed, copied and rewritten. In passing we have already pointed to the beginning of the gospel of Mark and the ending of the first letter to the Corinthians. In passing by?

But can we just pass them by, i.e. ignore them? Sometimes these alterations are trivial, but quite often they touch the core of the faith. Mark, after having described the resurrection ends his text in trepidation and silence and does not mention anything about any appearance of the risen lord. Luke places these appearances in Judea whereas Matthew, on the