

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

In the centuries since humans began building permanent dwellings, many hundreds of houses have been built facing waterfalls. Not until 1935, though, did anyone test what happens if in building a home we don't assume that a view of the falls means a view from a location level with the falls and across from them. The result was Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, one proof that from a different vantage point (in this case *over* the falls instead of *facing* them) things might look very different.

In the centuries since Gutenberg invented the printing press, many millions of copies of gospels have been printed. Not until now, though, has anyone tested what happens if we don't assume the primacy of the four gospels sanctioned by the Church. Even books about other gospels and editions of other gospels defer to the institutional canon by qualifying other gospels as, for instance, *gnostic* gospels or *apocryphal* gospels.

Fallingwater resulted from asking what the waterfall looks like from a different vantage: What if we look from atop the waterfall instead of alongside it? *The Gospel* resulted from asking what the gospel looks like from a different vantage: What if we give attention equally to canonical and noncanonical gospels? What if we do not keep existing gospels apart, reading them always and only separately, but integrate them instead into a single narrative? What if we foreground universality in God and Jesus by referring to them without gender specification? What if we don't grant that, just because we've always used certain words in English translations, they are the best or only match for the words used in the original? By posing such questions as these, *The Gospel* takes a vantage point never taken before, one from which things look very different.

The difference between *The Gospel* and the Church-enforced four is not total; it is not *opposition*. *The Gospel* offers familiar miracles (turning water into wine), familiar episodes (Jesus walking on water), familiar sayings ("Do unto others..."), familiar parables (the good Samaritan), and familiar assertions ("Where two or three

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are gathered...”). The difference is, though, substantial. Alongside such familiar elements, *The Gospel* offers less familiar miracles (five-year-old Jesus raising from the dead a playmate who has fallen from a rooftop), less familiar episodes (a doubting midwife’s hand withering when she checks Mary’s private parts to confirm virginity), less familiar sayings (“The god is a human-eater...”), less familiar parables (the householder who feeds the right food to each animal), and less familiar assertions (“I am nearer you than the clothes on your body”).

The difference is substantial enough to warrant this introductory note which, like the legend on a map (solid lines stand for paved roads, dashed lines for dirt trails; 1 inch = 1 mile), tries to give, not an interpretation, but just enough description and context to clarify: a succinct “here’s what you’re looking at.”

To describe what this book *is*, it helps to declare what it is *not*:

- It is not a scholarly monograph *about* the four Gospels. Composing *The Gospel* demanded a great deal of research, but the book is not a presentation of that research *per se*, in the form of an argument, after the manner of, say, Matthew Larsen’s *Gospels Before the Book*. It does not consist in my writings about ancient texts, but in the ancient texts themselves.

- This book is not a commentary *on* the four Gospels, on the order of, say, Muddiman and Barton’s *The Gospels* in the Oxford Bible Commentary series. Although I hope it adds perspective, its purpose is not primarily to add information. Again, *The Gospel* is not my words *about* the words of Gospel writers, but the words of Gospel writers themselves.

- This book is not a devotional guide *to* the four Gospels, as, say, the Foursquare Church’s *Journey Through the Gospels* is, intended to help a reader secure spiritual instruction or value from a reading of the four Gospels. This book is not advice on how to secure gospel from a Gospel, but a Gospel from which one might seek to secure gospel.

- *The Gospel* is not a fictionalization *of* the four Gospels, in the way that many novels and films reimagine gospel narratives: Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, say, or the Martin Scorsese film made from it; Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*; the novels *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* and *The Childhood of*

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*Jesus* by Nobel Prize winners José Saramago and J. M. Coetzee, respectively; and so on. This book is not “creative writing” or “imaginative literature” in the sense that applies to those works. I did not “make up” anything here. I selected, arranged, and translated all the material, but I invented none of it: everything in *The Gospel* derives from ancient sources, nothing originates with me.

This book *is* an account of the life and teachings of Jesus, composed by gathering many ancient sources (including but not at all limited to the four Gospels), selecting material from those sources, translating the selected material into English, and synthesizing the selected material into a single narrative.

One clarification of *why* such an account is called for comes from a musical analogy. Any of several gestures might accompany my declaration that “I’ve got ‘the Moonlight Sonata’ right here in my hands!” I might hold up my copy of the printed score, or I might hold up my vintage Vladimir Horowitz vinyl, or I might hold up my hands themselves. In each case, my conversation partner would know what I meant, though in each case I would mean something slightly different, and in each case, the Moonlight Sonata I held in my hands both would and would not be the Moonlight Sonata itself. For instance, the score I hold up is the Moonlight Sonata: it’s not “Rhapsody in Blue” or *Pride and Prejudice* or a turnip. But the score I hold up is not the Moonlight Sonata: it’s *the score* of the Moonlight Sonata. We have ways to point to the gap. When I read the score of the Moonlight Sonata, I read for the Moonlight Sonata. When I listen to my Vladimir Horowitz recording of the Moonlight Sonata, I listen for the Moonlight Sonata. When I show off for drunken friends as a cocktail party winds down, I impose on them a *performance* of the Moonlight Sonata. When one of those friends complains to another about how poorly I played, she might say, “*That* wasn’t the Moonlight Sonata.”

An analogous gap faces readers of any written work (the paperback on my nightstand is a copy of *Middlemarch*, not *Middlemarch* itself), and certainly faces readers of the gospel. In reading a Gospel (whatever copy I have of whatever Gospel, say my New Revised Standard Version of the Gospel According to Luke in a 2007 printing

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of an Oxford edition), I read for the gospel (for what it is that Luke's account is an account *of*). There are many ways to describe the gap: the scholar Mieke Bal, for instance, distinguishes text (Luke's written Gospel) from story (how Luke told things) from fabula (what Luke was telling); I myself have distinguished ore (the events and sayings of Jesus), arché (Jesus himself), archive (what Luke seeks to convey), artisan (Luke), artifact (the text of the book attributed to Luke). However the difference is parsed, I read words on a page in order to grasp something those words convey. The gap has sometimes been signaled by the typographical convention of capitalization: "Gospel" to refer to a written account, "gospel" to refer to what the written account is an account of. Even if I hold "the four Gospels" sacred, the gap still applies: I read the Gospel of Luke to receive from it the gospel.

In the context of that broad problematic, various concerns arise about the customary presentation of those vehicles of gospel, "the four Gospels." *The Gospel* was composed in response to the following concerns.

**1. Source Bottleneck:** The very term "the four Gospels" indicates how successfully history has identified the gospel with four particular Gospels, those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The success of that identification is not confined within the Church. To give just one example, the dictionary that came pre-loaded on my laptop gives three definitions of the word *gospel*, but supplements one of the three with this passage, highlighted by a shaded text box: "The four Gospels ascribed to St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John all give an account of the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, although the Gospel of John differs greatly from the other three. There are also several later, apocryphal accounts that are recorded as Gospels." The dictionary purports to be a neutral, "objective" source of information, not one advancing a viewpoint specific to the Church, yet by saying that the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are Gospels and that all other accounts are *recorded as* Gospels, it directly implies the authenticity of the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the inauthenticity of other accounts. Its way of delivering the truth that there are several later accounts implies the falsehood that there are *only* later accounts,

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not also earlier ones. And its characterization of the later accounts as apocryphal makes it sound as though apocryphal-ness were inherent in the accounts themselves (the way, say, oddness is inherent in the numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, and so on), rather than being a way of categorizing accounts (as a cheese plate's being an "appetizer" or a "dessert" has to do with how we categorize it).

The identification of the gospel with the four Gospels has been so successful that many persons are unaware that any other Gospels have been written. By its ambiguity, the term "the four Gospels" invites a conflation of the factual *truth* that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the only four Gospels that the Christian Church sanctions as sacred scripture, the *judgment* that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the only four Gospels that convey the gospel, and the *falsehood* that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the only four Gospels that exist.

As a way of resisting that conflation, *The Gospel* veers away from "source bottleneck," the customary presentation of *only* the four Gospels, by drawing on many sources. Substantial selections do come from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but substantial portions do not. Here is a complete list, in order of first appearance, of the other sources from which at least one passage comes:

*Melchizedek*

*The Concept of Our Great Power*

*The Gospel of Thomas*

*The Gospel of Truth*

*The Prayer of Paul*

*The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*

*The Proto-Gospel of James*

*Trimorphic Protennoia*

*The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

*Tripartite Tractate*

*The Gospel of Philip*

*The Gospel according to the Egyptians*

*The Dialogue of the Savior*

*The Odes of Solomon*

*Psalms of Heracleides*

*The Treatise on the Resurrection*

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*The Apocryphon of James*  
*The Acts of Peter*  
*The Interpretation of Knowledge*  
*Authoritative Discourse*  
*The Book of Thomas the Contender*  
*The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*  
*Naassene Hymn*  
*Epistula Apostolorum*  
Origen  
*The Gospel according to the Hebrews*  
*Second Discourse of the Great Seth*  
*The Apocryphon of John*  
Symeon of Mesopotamia  
Papyrus Egerton 2  
Justin  
Pseudo-Cyprian  
Papias  
*The Concept of Our Great Power*  
Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 840  
*The Teachings of Silvanus*  
*The Second Revelation of James*  
*The Testimony of Truth*  
*Thunder: Perfect Mind*  
Pseudo-Clement  
*The Acts of John*  
*The Gospel of Judas*  
*The Gospel of Nicodemus*  
*The Report of Pontius Pilate*  
*The Gospel according to Mary*  
*The Letter of Peter to Philip*  
*The Revelation of Peter*  
*Manichaean Psalms of the Bema*

In some cases, selections incorporated into *The Gospel* are arranged by “lining them up,” as when Luke’s account of the circumcision and presentation of the baby Jesus is followed by a passage of praise from Trimorphic Protennoia. In other cases, selections are

arranged by “interweaving them,” as when a sentence from the Gospel of Thomas and a sentence from the Gospel of Philip are inserted into the Beatitudes as they appear in the Gospel of Matthew.

**2. Enforced Separation:** The four Gospels consistently get presented in a certain way. That way includes a certain sequence: we know them as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; it sounds “wrong” to say Mark, John, Matthew, and Luke. Even more basic than sequence, though, is separation: they can be consistently presented in that sequence because they are consistently kept separate from one another. Over and over, Gospels have been put side-by-side; *The Gospel* puts them *together*. Surely there is value in presenting, say, the four canonical Gospels, each in its entirety, one by one, but it is severely limiting to present them *always* and *only* in that way. Side-by-side presentation results in fragmentation: for example, Matthew tells about an angel’s alerting *Joseph* that Jesus will be born; Luke tells about an angel’s alerting *Mary* that Jesus will be born; and Mark tells us nothing about either alert. Side-by-side presentation results also in repetition: for example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all three tell the parable of the sower, practically word-for-word. Countless editions *juxtapose* the canonical Gospels; until now, not a single one *integrates* them, much less does so with additional sources also integrated, and on equal terms.

Disrupting enforced separation has major consequences. For example, by selecting four Gospels and mandating a mode of presentation (separately, in a sequence, with Matthew first), institutional history plants the Gospels firmly in patriarchy: Matthew’s Gospel begins with a patriarchal genealogy, so Jesus’ identity is introduced to readers by a list of five women and forty-two men. By altering what is presented, and in what order, *The Gospel* alters the relation of the gospel to a pervasive social construct: instead of beginning with an entrenchment in patriarchy, it begins with an homage to the power of life.

*The Gospel* is not broken into the sort of numbered or titled chapters typical of a novel or memoir, but instead into segments with- in a continuous narrative ordered chronologically from birth through childhood then adulthood then death. This “outline” gives a highlight

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or two from each segment, to give an at-a-glance overview of the whole:

- Introduction.
- Invocation.
- Birth and childhood of Mary; birth of John; betrothal of Mary and Joseph.
- Birth of Jesus; presentation at the Temple.
- Flight from King Herod; return from Egypt.
- Episodes from Jesus' childhood.
- Baptism by John; temptation in the wilderness.
- Marriage at Cana; woman at the well.
- Herod kills John; Jesus' first preaching.
- Healing the ruler's son.
- Sermon on the mount.
- Bread from the sky.
- Healing the centurion's slave; stilling the storm; Gerasene demoniac.
- Healing a paralyzed person; healing the woman with a hemorrhage.
- Sending of the twelve; I've come to bring not peace but a sword; ministering women.
- Parable of the sower.
- Feeding of the 5,000; walking on water.
- The transfiguration; healing a boy with epilepsy.
- Parable of the lost sheep; parable of the unmerciful servant.
- Parable of the good Samaritan; parable of the prodigal son.
- My time has not yet come.
- Healing the bent woman; parable of the rich man and Lazarus.
- Parable of the laborers in the vineyard; healing of Bartimeus; story of Zacchaeus.
- Entry into Jerusalem; the withered fig tree.
- About paying tribute to Caesar; the greatest commandment; the widow's gift.
- The woman caught in adultery; I am from above.
- Parable of the ten maidens; prediction of the last judgment.
- Healing of the blind man; the good shepherd.

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- Light and darkness; the raising of Lazarus.
- Judas' mystical vision.
- The last supper; Satan enters Judas; love one another.
- Jesus arrested, tried, and sentenced.
- The crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.
- Appearances and teachings after the resurrection; doubting Thomas.
- Much else could be written.
- Benediction.

The structure of the book is determined by the selection and sequencing of source passages, at the large scale of that outline, but also within each of those segments. A few segments come entirely from one source, but most combine material from more than one source. Here is a representative sequence of five passages, from the approximately 450 that compose the book. This sequence occurs within the ninth segment, the one that includes Jesus' first preaching.

Luke 4:16-21	Rejection at Nazareth 1
Dialogue of the Savior 130:14-22	Streams of honey
Odes of Solomon 42	Overcoming death
Mark 6:2-4	Rejection at Nazareth 2
Gospel of Thomas 105	sonofabitch

The Gospel of Luke is a canonical Gospel, written in Greek. The Dialogue of the Savior is a second-century Gospel in Coptic, preserved in a codex in the Nag Hammadi library. The Odes of Solomon are hymns in Syriac, possibly second-century. The Gospel of Mark is a canonical Gospel, in Greek. The Gospel of Thomas is a noncanonical Gospel, in Coptic. *The Gospel* integrates its components without distinguishing canonical from noncanonical, and without marking transitions from one source to another.

**3. Example Blindness:** Another motivation for composing *The Gospel* was to contest a historically entrenched proscription. Under the influence of the Christian Church, it has come to be acceptable to *read* what the writers of the canonical Gospels *wrote*, but unacceptable

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to *do* what they *did*. The Gospel writers did not sit down at a blank page and record from memory their personal experiences. The writer of Luke, for instance, narrates a conversation in which an angel informs Mary that she will give birth to a child who will inherit the throne of David and rule forever, but Luke wasn't there for that conversation, any more than the writer of John was there "in the beginning" when "the Word was with God." The Gospel writers drew on the sources available to them, synthesizing from those sources an account they considered relevant and timely. The mode of regard sanctioned institutionally is to take as authoritative and final those accounts themselves. *The Gospel* arises from a different mode of regard: not taking as final the four canonical Gospel accounts, but taking as valuable the methodology that generated them. I have tried, that is to say, to imitate the process undertaken by the writers of the Biblical Gospels, fulfilling their example by assembling the sources available to me and synthesizing from them an account I take to be relevant and timely. Those available sources include the Biblical Gospels themselves, but even that is consistent with their precedent: the Gospel according to Mark was one of the sources for the writers of the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke.

Resistance to example blindness is not unrelated to resistance to source bottleneck and enforced separation. The writers of ancient Gospels wrote by hand, and had only handwritten sources: there were vastly fewer copies available of any source. Today, there are millions of copies of the four Gospels in print, never mind their availability on line. Even sources far less well-known are available to any reader with access to a library. Any reader of this book has nearly instant access to any of the dozens of sources used in composing *The Gospel*. Which is to say that one who follows the example of earlier Gospel writers in drawing on available sources has many more sources to draw on than they did. That situation is more exaggerated today than it was even one hundred years ago, since several of the sources drawn on in composing *The Gospel* are from the Nag Hammadi Library, which was (re)discovered in 1945, and not available to scholars until the early 1970s.

The sources on which *The Gospel* draws (enumerated above) all are readily available, each published in at least one book, and some in

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numerous books. Some of the particular books in which I found them are noted below, in the “Additional Reading” section. My process, my attempt to overcome example blindness, involved several steps: accumulation, internalization, selection, arrangement, and translation. Which draws attention to another of the concerns that motivates *The Gospel*.

**4. Translation Inertia:** By “translation inertia” I mean the tendency, strongest in often-translated and widely-read texts, and thus very strong in the four Gospels, to replicate in later translations word choices from earlier translations because they are now familiar, rather than because they are still apt. For many words in the original language, one English translation has come to be taken for granted, despite being inaccurate or misleading. *The Gospel* actively resists such translation inertia. The issue of translation inertia arises not only in relation to the canonical Gospels, which have been translated often enough for there to *be* customary translations, but also in relation to the other sources on which *The Gospel* draws: even though the non-canonical sources have not been translated as often, they still use words that are used in the canonical Gospels, so translations of them still face the problem of translation inertia. Here are a few examples, with very brief rationales, to illustrate the fresh look *The Gospel* attempts to offer in resistance to translation inertia.

Existing versions of the Biblical Gospels all translate the Greek *kurios* (κύριος) as “Lord.” This had a certain resonance in King James England, where “Lord” was a title in current use, but a contemporary U.S. citizen has no daily-life reference point for a “lord.” Yet to the original audience of the Greek Gospels, there *was* a sense of the word *kurios* that preceded its application to Jesus. For example, the same word is also applied to Pilate, and to the householder in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard: they are called *kurios* just like Jesus is. *The Gospel* translates *kurios* not as “Lord” but as “boss,” as for example at Matthew 9:28: where other translations have two blind persons respond to a question from Jesus with “Yea, Lord” or “Yes, Lord,” *The Gospel* has them respond with “Yes, boss.” Instead of giving a narrowly

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specialized English word for a common Greek word with a wide range of reference, *The Gospel* replaces the common Greek word with a common English one.

The Greek word *ouranos* (οὐρανός) offers a different kind of example. Prior English translations, following the King James Version, repeat a consistent pattern in using two different words to translate *ouranos*, “air” when it is used in connection with birds and “heaven” when it is used in connection with God. Although that distinction conveys the range of meaning of *ouranos*, it also creates a profoundly misleading impression. A reader of any prior English translation of Matthew 6:26, such as the New Revised Standard Version’s “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them,” would think that the birds are in one place, the air, and God is in another place, heaven. But that is not what Matthew says. The Greek uses the same word, *ouranos*, to designate the medium with which the birds and God are associated. They are the birds of the *ouranos*, and he is your *ouranos*-ly Father. The primary meaning of the Greek word is the region in which birds fly; only secondarily, by extension, does it refer to a realm, figuratively above us, in which deities may reside. In English, though, “heaven” refers primarily to the figuratively “up” realm of deities, and only derivatively to the region in which birds fly. So, instead of separating God and the birds, as prior English translations do, placing God in “heaven” and birds in “the air,” *The Gospel* chooses the English word with the same primary meaning as the Greek word, and places birds and God both in the “sky.” Thus Matthew 6:26 becomes “Look to the birds in the sky that don’t plant or harvest or gather into barns, yet your fother in the sky feeds them.” In *The Gospel*, God is not *above* the environment birds live in, but *within* that environment. As with resistance to source bottleneck, enforced separation, and example blindness, resistance to translation inertia has consequences. In all prior English translations of the Biblical Gospels, God is stationed outside the earth’s atmosphere; *The Gospel* restores the original sense of the Greek, which locates God *within* the biosphere.

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The Greek word *angelos* (ἄγγελος) is, perhaps obviously, the source of the English word angel, so other English versions translate *angelos* as “angel.” But *angelos*, like *kurios*, was a common Greek word, not a specialized religious word, as the English *angel* is. The English *angel* calls up images of white-robed figures with wings and haloes, but the Greek word meant anyone (most typically a normal, mortal, earthly human) sent with a message from one person to another. (The Greek word had corresponding forms: the verb *angello* (ἀγγέλλω) meant to carry a message, the noun *angelia* (ἀγγελία) was the message itself. The Greek word translated “gospel” was *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον), meaning a good message.) Instead of “angel,” then, I have translated *angelos* as “emissary,” to restore the original sense of someone sent with a message. So, in contrast to the New American Bible’s translation of Matthew 28:5 as “Then the angel said to the women in reply, ‘Do not be afraid!...’,” *The Gospel* translates the same passage as “In response, the emissary said to the women, Don’t fear.”

Similarly, the Greek *daimon* (δαίμων) is usually translated by the English word that comes from it, *demon*. The English “demon,” though, carries a connotation of evil: demons are always and essentially evil. The Greek *daimon*, though, might be good or evil. The *daimonion* that, in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates says helps him avoid making mistakes, for example, is very good. That range of moral states makes it sensible to qualify what kind of *daimon* is being observed, as occurs in Luke 4:33, translated in the New American Standard Bible as “And there was a man in the synagogue possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon...” In English, the “unclean” is redundant, since all demons are unclean. To push back against the misconception conveyed by translating *daimon* with “demon,” *The Gospel* translates it with the morally neutral term “visitant.” This allows the qualification in Luke 4:33 to add meaning, not simply to be redundant: “In the synagogue one man, held by the breath of a toxic visitant...”

Instead of the usual translation “spirit” for the Greek *pneuma* (πνεῦμα), *The Gospel* translates it as “breath.” Instead of the usual

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translation “sin” for the Greek *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία), *The Gospel* translates it as “error.” Instead of the usual translation “Christ” for the Greek *christos* (χριστός), *The Gospel* translates it as “salve.” Instead of the usual translation “disciple” for the Greek *mathetes* (μάθητής), *The Gospel* translates it as “apprentice.” Instead of the usual translation “repent” for the Greek *metanoeo* (μετανοέω), *The Gospel* translates it as “reconsider.” Instead of the usual “resurrection” for the Greek *anastasis* (ἀνάστασις), *The Gospel* translates it as “standing up.” And so on, for numerous recurring words.

I am under no illusions about these and similar choices in translation: no translation can possibly reproduce the original perfectly. I have tried, though, to resist translation inertia by applying the general rule of *not* replacing non-specialized Greek words with specialized English words. If an English word has come to be used exclusively or primarily in religious contexts, I have sought an alternative when translating Greek (or Latin or Coptic) words that were not exclusively or primarily used in religious contexts.

**5. Gender Tilt:** One instance of resisting translation inertia in *The Gospel* is so pervasive that it merits mention on its own. It differs from the examples just given, in seeking not to *restore* a feature of the original language but to *overcome* a feature that the original languages and English share. In Greek, Latin, and Coptic, as traditionally in English, God is referred to as male: a father, not a mother; a he, not a she. This makes gospel universalism harder to convey in regard to gender than in regard to ethnicity or nationality. It is easy to make divine favor available to all persons if the Jews are God’s chosen people because God *chose* the Jews, not because God *is* Jewish, but it is hard to make divine favor available to all persons if God — God *himself* — is male, possessed of xy chromosomes, testicles, and a beard.

The cognitive dissonance of portraying as male a purportedly universal deity and protagonist has been sustained, rather than reduced, as translations have continued to replicate in English the gendering of God and Jesus in the originals. It is easy to see why translations have done so, since the gendering is embedded in the relevant languages

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themselves. But by a few coinages, by *changing* the language, *The Gospel* sidesteps that problem. Where God is referred to in the source texts as a father, *The Gospel*, merging the words “father” and “mother,” uses “fother,” so, for example, instead of declaring that “I and the father are one,” in *The Gospel* Jesus declares that “I and the fother are one.” Where Jesus is referred to as a son, *The Gospel* uses “xon,” so for example in the annunciation Mary is told not that she will bear a son but that she will bear a xon. (Pronouncing it “zun” allows for an aural as well as a visual difference from “son.”) When referring to Jesus or God, substitutes are used for gendered pronouns: “he” becomes “xe,” “him” becomes “xer,” and “his” becomes “xer” or “xers” as appropriate. So for example, what the New Revised Standard Version translates as “he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end,” *The Gospel* translates as “across the ages xe will rule the house of Jacob, and to xer reign there will be no end.” (Pronouncing the pronouns as “zhe,” “zher,” and “zhers” allows for aural distinction from “she,” so that *xe* neither looks like *he* nor sounds like *she*.) These measures sometimes combine with other gender-muting measures, so for example the formula usually translated “the Son of Man” is translated in *The Gospel* as “the xon of humanity.” They also resonate with gender-saturated moments, such as Matthew 19:10-12, which in *The Gospel* becomes the first instance of Jesus speaking explicitly on behalf of the genderqueer. Because gendered forms of identification and reference occur so frequently, this revision of those forms influences every page, and nearly every sentence, of *The Gospel*.

In addressing those five concerns, *The Gospel* defies the institutional history that admits only four Gospels, keeps them separate from one another, treats them as objects rather than examples, translates them narrowly, and perpetuates their gender hierarchization. That institutional history is strong, and has been rigidly enforced, but in defying it *The Gospel* seeks to clear away obstructions between Gospel and gospel. The Gospel seeks, that is, to refresh what it might mean to pursue the ideal to which the poet Czeslaw Milosz gives eloquent expression: “it is proper that we move our finger / Along letters more enduring than those carved in stone.”