



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

THE GOSPEL AND THE CATECHUMENATE IN THE THIRD CENTURY

Author(s): Paul F. Bradshaw

Source: *The Journal of Theological Studies*, APRIL 1999, NEW SERIES, Vol. 50, No. 1 (APRIL 1999), pp. 143-152

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23967864>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Theological Studies*

THE GOSPEL AND THE CATECHUMENATE IN THE THIRD CENTURY

THE conventional picture that has been painted of pre-baptismal instruction in the early church is one in which the candidates attended public services of the word on weekdays and the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist together with all the faithful. At the latter they heard the scriptural readings and homily, and then were dismissed before the faithful began to pray together. While this picture may hold good for many places in the fourth century, a number of pieces of evidence lead us to question its universal applicability at that time and its reliability for any earlier period.

I. THE DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM

When the heathen desire and promise to repent, saying 'We believe', we receive them into the congregation so that they may hear the word, but do not receive them into communion until they receive the seal and are fully initiated.¹

At first sight this early third-century Syrian text looks odd, apparently expecting that converts would express their repentance and faith *before* they had been allowed to hear the word. Clearly, there must have been some preliminary instruction designed to bring them to repentance and faith. Nevertheless, it certainly appears that some specific teachings were reserved until after they had made an expression of commitment to Christ, although it is impossible to tell from this short statement what those teachings might have been.

II. THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION OF HIPPOLYTUS

And when they choose those appointed to receive baptism, having examined their life, if they lived in holiness while they were catechumens, and if they honoured the widows, and if they visited those who are sick, and they fulfilled every good work, and when those who brought them in testify in his [sic] behalf that they acted thus, then let them hear the gospel.²

¹ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.39; English translation from Sebastian Brock and Michael Vasey, *The Liturgical Portions of the Didascalia*, Grove Liturgical Study 29 (Nottingham, 1982), p. 12.

² *Apostolic Tradition* 20; English translation from the Sahidic version in W. Till and J. Leipoldt, *Der koptische Text der Kirchenordnung Hippolyts* (Berlin, 1954). I am grateful to one of my former students, L. Edward Phillips, for assistance with the translation.

This church order, usually dated around the same time as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* but conventionally thought to have originated in Rome, seems to envisage a similar situation: the baptismal candidates have already undergone a lengthy catechumenate, which involved considerable teaching, but it is only now, after an examination of their conduct while they were catechumens, that they will be allowed to hear 'the gospel' in the final stages of their preparation for baptism. What was 'the gospel'? Was it some particular, secret text? Or gospel readings in general? If the latter, then obviously in this community, wherever and whatever it was, catechumens cannot have attended the regular eucharistic ministry of the word or they would already have heard many gospel passages.

III. FOURTH-CENTURY EASTERN RITES

Our evidence from the fourth century in the East does not show any teaching being reserved until the final stage of baptismal preparation. If that had once been the case, it has certainly now disappeared. *Apostolic Constitutions*, for example, locates the dismissal of catechumens after the reading of the gospel and the sermon at the eucharistic liturgy.³ On the other hand, John Chrysostom seems to have known at Antioch both a formula of renunciation of evil and an act of adherence to Christ that occurred on the day *before* the baptism itself: 'Tomorrow, on Friday, at the ninth hour, you must have certain questions asked of you and you must present your contracts to the Master.'⁴ Antoine Wenger advanced the suggestion that these rites had been moved back a day from the baptism itself in the late fourth century as a consequence of the large number of candidates presenting themselves for baptism,⁵ and several other scholars have adopted his hypothesis.⁶ But such an explanation does not seem very probable. Moreover, a similar pattern can be found in the rite of Constantinople in the fifth century;⁷ and the testimony of Theodore of Mopsuestia and of the later Syrian rites also show

³ *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.6.

⁴ *Baptismal Instruction* 11.19; English translation from P. W. Harkins, *St John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, Ancient Christian Writers 31 (London, 1963), p. 166.

⁵ Antoine Wenger, *Jean Chrysostome, Huit catéchèses baptismales*, Sources Chrétiennes 50 (Paris, 1957), pp. 79–80.

⁶ See for example Harkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 221–2, n. 37; Thomas M. Finn, *The Liturgy of Baptism in the Baptismal Instructions of John Chrysostom* (Washington, DC, 1967), pp. 88–90.

⁷ See Miguel Arranz, 'Les Sacrements de l'ancien Euchologe Constantinopolitain', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 50 (1984), pp. 377–88.

traces of this same two-fold structure, even though in these cases both parts now take place on the same occasion.⁸ It is tempting to suppose that the existence of an interval between the renunciation/act of adherence and the baptismal rite proper had some specific purpose behind it, and that, in the light of the evidence of the *Didascalia* and the *Apostolic Tradition*, the original reason was to allow time for the imparting of some particular teaching to the candidates. If so, we may presume that the interval might at one time have been greater than twenty-four hours, but that it gradually shrank when it ceased to have this function, until it is scarcely perceptible at all in the later rites.

In support of this contention, we may note that neither the *Baptismal Catecheses* of Cyril of Jerusalem nor the later Armenian Lectionary expect the gospel to be read at the assemblies for the instruction of catechumens during the Lenten season. Cyril does not hesitate to use gospel references when teaching, yet he never cites them as constituting one of the principal readings for the day's lecture. Similarly, the Armenian Lectionary does not include any gospel texts among its prescribed readings for baptismal instruction.⁹ This is not to say that the gospels were still really being kept hidden from the unbaptized in fourth-century Jerusalem, but only that there appears to have been the memory of a tradition that this was once so, which the choice of catechetical readings still reflects. It is true that Egeria states that the bishop goes through 'the whole Bible beginning with Genesis',¹⁰ but we may doubt the literalness with which this remark should be taken: there simply would not have been time for the whole Bible to be covered, even in five weeks of daily teaching for three hours that Egeria says is assigned to it.

IV. AMBROSE OF MILAN

What was it that we did on Saturday? We began with the Opening. The mysteries of the opening were performed when the bishop touched

⁸ See A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, Woodbrooke Studies 6 (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 34–5, 47–50; Sebastian Brock, 'Studies in the Early History of the Syrian Orthodox Baptismal Liturgy', *JTS* 23 (1972), pp. 22–3; Ruth A. Meyers, 'The Structure of the Syrian Baptismal Rite', in Paul F. Bradshaw (ed.), *Essays in Early Eastern Initiation*, Alcuin/GROW Liturgical Study 8 (Nottingham, 1988), pp. 31 and 34–8.

⁹ The Greek text of Cyril's lectures is in *PG* 33:331–1064; the Armenian Lectionary is in A. Renoux, *Le Codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, vol. 2 (Turnhout, 1971), pp. 233–7.

¹⁰ 46.2; English translation from John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London, 1971), p. 144.

your ears and your nostrils. What does this mean? In the gospel, when the deaf and dumb man was brought to Our Lord Jesus Christ he touched the man's ears and his mouth: his ears, because the man was deaf; his mouth because he was dumb. And he said: *Effeta*, a Hebrew word which means 'be opened'. The reason why the bishop touched your ears was that they might be opened to the word and to the homily of the priest.¹¹

It is usual to explain this text by saying that Ambrose has here misinterpreted what was originally meant to be part of a pre-baptismal exorcistic ritual,¹² as evidenced in the *Apostolic Tradition*, where immediately after exorcising the candidates so that 'all alien spirits should flee from them and never return to them', the bishop is said to breathe on them and 'seal' their foreheads, ears, and nostrils (by 'seal', is presumably meant 'make the sign of the cross on').¹³ But such an explanation casts considerable doubt on Ambrose's intelligence. Could it really be that there was no tradition at all about the meaning of this particular ritual in Ambrose's community—that they just did it without any idea why—and that consequently Ambrose was forced to cast around to find some significance for it, and so proposed that it was intended as a parallel to Jesus' opening of the ears and mouth of the man who was deaf and dumb (Mark 7:32–7), even though 'sealing' would fit the immediate liturgical context better than 'opening', and even though it is the nose and not the mouth that is touched by the bishop? And if we suggest instead that it may not have been Ambrose who made this connection but some other Milanese bishop a generation or two before, then the hypothesis becomes even harder to sustain: could Christians there already have forgotten the meaning of the action at the beginning of the fourth century or earlier? In any case, according to this theory, Ambrose had only to look down the road to Rome, and the genuine interpretation would have been there, staring him in the face; and we know that Ambrose liked to try to keep in step with Roman liturgical customs as far as possible, as is evident from his embarrassment over the fact that Rome did not practice the post-baptismal *pedilavium* as his community did.¹⁴ Or do we suppose that the meaning of the ritual had been forgotten in every church and not just at Milan?

¹¹ Ambrose, *De sacramentis* 1.2; English translation from E. J. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (Slough, 1971), p. 100.

¹² So, for example, Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, pp. 16 and 100, n. 5.

¹³ *Apostolic Tradition* 20.

¹⁴ *De sacramentis* 3.4–7.

Let us then consider an alternative hypothesis, that there was a traditional meaning attached to this action in Milan, and that it did have something to do with 'opening', and so Ambrose's suggested parallel to the healing act of Jesus may not have been quite so wide of the mark after all. But such an opening of the ears only really makes sense if something aural is about to be delivered to the candidates. Ambrose tries to relate it to the mystagogical catechesis that he delivers to the neophytes daily during Easter week after their initiation. In the first of these addresses he tells them to 'Open your ears, then, and lay hold of the good odour of eternal life that was breathed upon you by the gift of the sacraments. This we signified to you when we celebrated the mystery of opening and said: "Ephthatha—that is, open up", so that each one who was advancing to grace would know what was being asked and would remember how to respond.'¹⁵ This, however, seems to be stretching the meaning of the ceremony a little far, and it would make much more sense if some reading or teaching had followed immediately upon the liturgical action. Yet, just because there is no sign of the presence of any such thing in Ambrose's account is not to say that there was not once such a practice and that its remembrance was preserved in the retention of the accompanying ritual at that point. We may also note that, although the catechumens were permitted to be present for all the liturgical readings and the homily at Milan, they were always dismissed before the *traditio* of the Creed to the *competentes* a week before their baptism.¹⁶

As for the supposed existence of a parallel ritual elsewhere which was understood as related to exorcism, our only evidence for that is the *Apostolic Tradition* itself—there is no trace of it in any other early source—and I would suggest that the provenance and date of the baptismal *ordo* in that church order are too uncertain for us to base much upon it.¹⁷ I have to confess, however, that I am just as puzzled as Ambrose obviously was as to why the ritual at Milan included the nostrils along with the ears.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ambrose, *De mysteriis* 1.3; English translation from Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London, 1997), p. 146.

¹⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 20.4.

¹⁷ See further Paul F. Bradshaw, 'Redating the *Apostolic Tradition*: Some Preliminary Steps', in John Baldovin and Nathan Mitchell (eds.), *Rule of Prayer, Rule of Faith: Essays in Honor of Aidan Kavanagh, OSB* (Collegeville, 1996), pp. 3–17.

¹⁸ See *De sacramentis* 1.3.

V. ROME

Afterwards the announcement is made by the deacon thus: 'Let the catechumens depart. If anyone is a catechumen, let him depart. All catechumens are to go outside.'¹⁹

This directive from *Ordo Romanus* XI, which dates from the seventh century according to M. Andrieu, belongs to the occasion of the pre-baptismal scrutinies of the Roman rite, and is located prior to the reading of the liturgical gospel. Now it is clear from other evidence that at this time at Rome catechumens were not regularly excluded from hearing the Sunday gospel readings. Is it possible, therefore, that their early dismissal on these particular Lenten Sundays is a remnant of a much older tradition when they were not permitted to be present for any gospel readings?

To this we may add the custom of the *Apertio aurium*, 'The opening of the ears', in the Roman baptismal tradition. Although this ritual is described in *Ordo Romanus* XI (n. 44–60), it is in the Gelasian Sacramentary that we first encounter the title, 'The exposition of the gospels to the elect in the opening of the ears'.²⁰ What followed was the solemn reading of the opening verses of all four canonical gospels to those awaiting baptism at Easter, who by this period were of course infants and not adults. The Gelasian Sacramentary does not make it clear exactly when in Lent this ceremony took place, but *Ordo Romanus* XI attaches it to the third scrutiny, along with the delivery of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Bernard Botte believed the custom to be a recent innovation, developed when the genuine instruction of baptismal candidates in the Scriptures had broken down as a result of the decline of adult initiands, and entirely unrelated to the 'Opening' earlier spoken of by Ambrose.²¹ His case seems to be supported by the fact that the ritual of the *Effeta* continues to exist in the later Roman tradition as well, on a quite separate occasion to the *Apertio aurium*, on Holy Saturday itself, as it had in Ambrose's church.

On the other hand, Amalarius of Metz was familiar with a variant of this tradition in which the *Effeta* was performed instead on the day of the third and final pre-baptismal scrutiny, immediately before the reading of the opening verses of the four gospels.²²

¹⁹ *Ordo Romanus* XI, no. 29, in M. Andrieu (ed.), *Les Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen Age*, vol. 2 (Louvain, 1948), p. 425.

²⁰ 'Incipit Expositio evangeliorum in aurium apertione ad electos': no. XXXIV in L. C. Mohlberg, OSB (ed.), *Liber sacramentorum Romanae ecclesiae ordinis anni circuli* (Rome, 1960), pp. 46–8.

²¹ Bernard Botte, 'Apertio Aurium', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1 (Stuttgart, 1950), pp. 487 ff.

²² Amalarius, *De eccl. off.* 1.8 (PL 105:1005).

The Roman 'Canones ad Gallos' of c.400 also mention an anointing that was performed at the third scrutiny, implying that it was the only occasion in the initiatory process when exorcised oil was used but offering no explanation as to its precise meaning.²³ Moreover, Amalarius affirms elsewhere that it was 'our custom' for catechumens to be dismissed before the reading of the gospel.²⁴ Is it possible that what is preserved here is the older practice, or at least *an* older practice, in which catechumens were not allowed to hear the gospel read in church and so the ritual 'opening of the ears' with exorcised oil preceded the revelation of the gospels to adult baptismal candidates after the scrutinies had revealed their readiness for the completion of their initiation at Easter? Something similar may at one time have also been the case at Milan, but it would seem that later developments were slightly different from one another in the two ecclesiastical centres. At Milan, as we have seen, the migration of secret teaching to post-baptismal catechesis had by the time of Ambrose apparently led to the gap being closed and the Opening/*Effeta* ceremony deposited at the beginning of the baptismal rite itself on Holy Saturday, even though the delivery of the Creed remained one week earlier. At Rome, on the other hand, the ceremony seems to have remained at first at the conclusion of the third and final scrutiny, followed immediately by the symbolic reading of the gospels and the delivery of the Creed and Lord's Prayer, and only later was it detached from there and moved to Holy Saturday morning, after the exorcism of the *electi* and prior to the return of the Creed, though leaving its name 'Opening of the ears' behind with the symbolic gospel reading.

VI. GAUL

That catechumens are to hear the reading of the gospel. It was agreed that the gospels shall be read to catechumens in all churches in our provinces.²⁵

This directive, Canon 18 of the First Council of Orange (441), strongly implies that previously the opposite custom had prevailed, at least in some churches in the region, and that catechumens had been regularly dismissed at the Sunday liturgy before

²³ Canon 8; J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Florence, 1759–98), vol. 3, col. 1137; English translation in E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 2nd edn. (London, 1970), p. 229.

²⁴ *Consuetudo nostra tenet ut catechumenos repellamus ante Evangelium*: Amalarius, *De eccl. off.* 3.36.

²⁵ Mansi, op. cit., vol. 6, col. 439.

the gospel was read. A century later Canon 1 of the Council of Valencia in Spain enacted similar legislation, demanding that the gospel and homily should be heard by catechumens.²⁶ P. Borella judged the practices condemned by these synods to be merely recent deviations from the old established tradition of dismissal after the gospel and homily.²⁷ But why should some churches have suddenly decided to change what is alleged to have been the universal Christian practice and forced catechumens to leave the church in the middle of the ministry of the word, especially at a time when the number of adult baptismal candidates was in decline? Is it not more likely that these churches were persisting in hanging on to an ancient local custom and that the councils were attempting to bring them into line with what was, now at least, the practice of the majority?

CONCLUSION

Individually these various pieces of evidence may not be thought to amount to much, but I would contend that cumulatively they start to build something of a case for the thesis that at least in some Christian communities in the second and third centuries there was a custom of reserving certain teachings to those in the final stages of preparation for baptism and not allowing them to be more widely known to the unbaptized, a custom that lingered on in some places into the fourth century and even later, albeit now only in symbolic form. Its decline in the Constantinian era could well have been the result of the growing trend at that time both of making the baptismal rite itself secret and mysterious, and of developing instead a period of post-baptismal mystagogy when certain teachings were revealed for the first time to the neophytes.

Such a practice does not require us to look to gnosticism or pagan mystery religions for its origin: there are enough signs within the New Testament texts themselves of a tendency towards some form of secrecy within primitive Christian communities. Nor does it force us to postulate that the teaching consisted of certain mysterious 'secret gospels', such as that proposed by Morton Smith²⁸—though, of course, it does not rule them out. It could just be that Jesus' own words were considered too sacred for the gospels to be read to any but the baptized and those who were about to be admitted into the fellowship of the faithful.

²⁶ Ibid., vol. 8, col. 620.

²⁷ P. Borella, 'La "missa" o "dimissio catechumenorum"', *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 53 (1939), pp. 60–110, esp. 60–72.

²⁸ Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel* (New York, 1973).

I realize that to some this suggestion may sound much too preposterous to be taken seriously. How could pagans possibly have been attracted to Christianity, and how could they have been converted to the faith and been willing to prepare for baptism, if the contents of the gospels had never been fully revealed to them? In any case, early Christian writers themselves testify to the existence of knowledge about Jesus and his teaching among their pagan contemporaries.²⁹ But we must beware of reading back into Christian antiquity the presuppositions of our own age. We tend to assume that in order for a person to be drawn into a religious sect, it must be the central doctrines of that sect which attract them and win them over, causing them to change their life-style. In other words, we see the sequence as: believing first, belonging second, behaving third. But this is not necessarily always true, even for our own day, let alone for centuries and cultures long ago. In particular, the scrutiny of baptismal candidates described in some detail in the *Apostolic Tradition*, wherever and whenever that text might have originated, clearly focuses on testing the behaviour of the catechumens rather than their beliefs or the content of Christian doctrine, as a modern confirmation class would probably do instead: 'Have they honoured the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of good work?'³⁰

It is also interesting to note that the biblical readings prescribed for Lenten catechetical assemblies even in the fourth century tend not only to be drawn from the Old Testament rather than the New but also to give considerable emphasis to those books from which moral lessons might be drawn. Ambrose indeed began his mystagogical catechesis by reminding his hearers: 'Every day, after the deeds of the patriarchs or the precepts of the Book of Proverbs were read, we preached a sermon on virtuous behavior so that you might be educated and instructed by these things ... Thus, having been renewed by baptism, you would hold fast to the style of life that befits those who have been washed clean',³¹ and in the introduction to his *De Ioseph* he indicates the virtues that could be derived from the stories of the patriarchs: 'in him [i.e., Joseph] there shone forth above all the mark of chastity. In Abraham you have learned the undaunted devotion of faith, in Isaac the purity of a sincere heart, in Jacob the spirit's signal

²⁹ See the examples cited in Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, Alcuin/GROW Joint Liturgical Study 32 (Nottingham, 1995), p. 11.

³⁰ *Apostolic Tradition* 20.

³¹ Ambrose, *De mysteriis* 1.1; English translation from Ramsey, *Ambrose*, p. 146.

endurance of toils.³² It is not without significance that the book of Genesis also featured prominently in Lenten assemblies at this period in both Jerusalem and Antioch.³³

Thus, it rather looks as though it was behaving that was the prerequisite to belonging in the early church, and that at least some believing might have been expected to come later. Indeed, it appears to have been the behaviour of Christians rather than their beliefs as such that was the principal attraction to the religion for pagans and the most effective means of evangelization. Christians would thus not have needed to tell them everything about the gospel in order to draw them into the catechumenate. The ethical precepts of the Lord might have been enough, and the deepest mysteries of the faith might well have been reserved for the time when they were ready to make the final commitment of baptism.³⁴

PAUL F. BRADSHAW

³² English translation from Michael P. McHugh, *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*, Fathers of the Church 65 (Washington, DC, 1972), p. 189.

³³ See Rolf Zeffass, *Die Schriftlesung im Kathedra-loffizium Jerusalems* (Münster, 1968), pp. 132–7.

³⁴ Since I completed this paper, my former student Dr L. Edward Phillips has reminded me that the ‘Two Ways’ material in the *Didache*, which contains allusions to the ethical teaching of Jesus but no account of the saving mysteries of the cross, might well have been typical of what was made known to catechumens before they were allowed to ‘hear the gospel’; and that *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.39, though late in its present form, may also reflect the two stages of teaching, since it indicates that the catechumens first learn about creation, the Old Testament saints, etc., and only after baptism do they learn about Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension (cf. also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Baptismal Catechesis* 6.29).