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Article

Images of the Four Evangelists: Visual Discourses on the Originators of the Word of God

Bruno Reudenbach | Hamburg

1. Introduction: the fourfold Gospels as Word of God

Gospel books are the most important liturgical manuscripts of the Middle Ages. They contain the Gospels of the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as a series of prologues and synoptic tables. In the four Gospels, the evangelists narrate the life of Christ, hand down his teachings, the words and sermons he addressed to his disciples and the apostles. Therefore, according to Christian belief, God revealed himself in these texts. Following this idea, in the ritual use of the Middle Ages, a Gospel book was not only a book for reading passages from the Gospel texts, but it could represent Christ himself.¹ At the beginning of the service, the book was led into the church like a person in a procession, accompanied by candles and incense, and acclamations were addressed to it. The Gospel book represented Christ *in persona*,² who in turn spoke to the believers through the texts contained in the book. Above all, the four Gospels, from which passages were read in every service and which often reproduced the literal speech of Jesus, were therefore regarded as the Word of God and Holy Scripture.

An intense debate that took place in the early church in the period from the second to the fourth century CE about the canonicity of biblical texts also resulted in which texts were to be counted as part of the New Testament.³ Towards the end of the second century, this question was largely decided, so that the limitation to four Gospels, namely those of the authors with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, was also established. A reflection of this canonisation process can still be found in the apparatus of prologues, texts and indexes that are added to the actual Gospel texts in every medieval Gospel book.⁴

From the commentary of the church father Jerome (c. 347–419 CE) on the Gospel of Matthew comes the prologue that begins with the words ‘Plures fuisse, qui evangelia scripserunt’. (‘There were many who wrote Gospels’).⁵ Jerome thus emphasises the diversity of the textual tradition and then justifies the selection of four Gospels. For this he cites evidence from the Old Testament and the Apocalypse to conclude: ‘Quibus cunctis perspicue ostenditur quattuor tantum debere evangelia suscipi’ (‘With all this it is clearly shown that there are only four Gospels that must be included (sc. in the canon of biblical books)’).⁶

However, the definition of four Gospels gave rise to another problem, namely how the one and divine truth could be transmitted fourfold in four different and partly divergent Gospels.⁷ Attempts to solve this problem were gospel harmonies, in which the four gospel texts were harmonised into one coherent text, or the synoptic canon tables invented by Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260 – c. 339/340 CE) and still contained in every medieval gospel book.⁸

In the background, this also touches on the relationship of the human authors to the supernatural origin of their texts as the Word of God. In the prologues, the *Plures fuisse* prologue of Jerome and in the *Argumenta*, which are short characterisations of the various evangelists that precede each Gospel, this relationship is only occasionally touched upon, but hardly ever explicitly discussed. They are rather biographical in character and focus primarily on the circumstances under which the four authors wrote their texts. But at least Jerome, for example, states that the beginning of John’s Gospel ‘caelo veniens’ (‘came from heaven’) and

¹ Lentjes 2005, 136–138; Reudenbach 2014.

² Heinzer 2009; 2015, 200.

³ Metzger 1987; Karpp 1992; Watson 2013, 2017.

⁴ De Bruyne 1920/2015, 153–208.

⁵ De Bruyne 1920/2015, 155–156.

⁶ De Bruyne 1920/2015, 156.

⁷ Merkel 1971; Watson 2013, 2017.

⁸ Wünsch 1982; O’Loughlin 2010; Crawford 2019; Bausi, Reudenbach, and Wimmer 2020; Wallraff 2021.

Luke's *Argumentum* says: 'sancto instigante spiritu [...] hoc scripsit evangelium' ('urged by the Holy Spirit he wrote this Gospel').⁹

The apparatus accompanying the Gospels in medieval Gospel books thus testifies to a lively interest in the origin and history of transmission of the Gospels, not least to emphasise their authenticity in each specific manuscript. At the same time, the use in ecclesiastical worship, in which the book is venerated as Christ, demonstrates the high rank of the texts as the Word of God. For the question of the originators, which is the focus of the following, a significant complex of transmission emerges when the Gospels written in the first century CE are simultaneously attributed as the Word of God to four different human authors, authenticated by their biographies and repeatedly copied and passed on in Gospel books with their names in the following centuries. The constellation thus encompasses the supernatural origin, the writing of the original Gospel text up to its ever-newer copies in concrete manuscripts, and thus also the relations of various originators to each other.

As already said, this complexity, which results from the history of the transmission and canonisation of the biblical text, appears only sporadically and between the lines in the paratexts of the Gospel books. However, if we look at the images of evangelists, which are often found in illuminated books of the Gospels, the result is completely different.¹⁰

2. The Images of the evangelists as authors of the Gospels

In many medieval gospel books, the images of the evangelists belong to a fixed set of three or four pages. This set usually includes incipit and initial pages, which are distinguished from the continuous text by precious and elaborate design.¹¹ Often, a full-page picture of an evangelist is also part of this sequence of pages, placed at the beginning of each Gospel. In this way, Christian book culture followed an ancient tradition that knew various types of author images presenting an author as a pictorial prologue.¹² These images were the pictorial identification of the authors as originators of the text that followed the images. Possibly, the idea that texts were ultimately based on orality, that they arose from oral dictation and that the author himself spoke through the text,

also played a role.¹³ In this sense, the pictorially produced corporeal presence of the author could be understood as a direct link between the text and the person of the author as its originator.

The evangelist images of the Middle Ages entered the tradition of the ancient author images, using the type that depicts the author in a seated position and either writing or reflecting. Thus, the typical image of an evangelist, developed especially by the precious Gospel books of the Carolingians in the late eighth and ninth centuries CE, shows a seated evangelist in an architectural frame, with book or scroll, sometimes with writing desk and writing tools.¹⁴

Deviating from the ancient tradition, the evangelist images present Matthew, Mark, Luke and John at the beginning of the respective Gospel as its author, but not, as will be shown, as its originator. Can the Gospel text, as the Word of God and divine truth, come from an earthly author at the same time? The evangelist images react to this contradictory constellation by differentiating the concept of the author, visualised through the modification of the older iconography of the author image. The images can almost be understood as a visual discourse on the special status of the Gospel text and its originator.

It was the painters and scribes of the Carolingian period who developed the visualisation of a concept differentiating between various originators in the image of the evangelists. On the one hand, they used the representation scheme that can be traced back to the sixth century CE in the so-called Augustine Gospels (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, cod. 286) for this purpose:¹⁵ the Evangelist is flanked by two columns that are connected at the top with a semicircular arch field. In the picture of St. Luke in the Gospel of St. Augustine, an arrangement is derived from this, which was received again and again in the following centuries: Immediately above the enthroned evangelist, his symbolic being is placed in the arched field. On the other hand, the evangelist and the symbolic being were often shown together in a rectangular frame, without the framing of a column-arch architecture.

⁹ De Bruyne 1920/2015, 156, 172.

¹⁰ Nilgen 1968; Bloch 1973.

¹¹ Elbern 1971; Brown 2017; Reudenbach 2021.

¹² Bloch 1968; Nilgen 1973, 525–528; Meier 2000; Elsner 2020, 106–107.

¹³ Wenzel 1995, 204–223.

¹⁴ Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1956; Mutherich 1965, 31–36; Nilgen 1968, 708; Bloch 1973, 460–488.

¹⁵ Wormald 1954; Weitzmann 1977, 112–115.



Fig. 1: Godescalc Gospel Lectionary, 781/783 CE. Paris, BnF, nouv. acq. lat. 1203, fol. 1^v: Evangelist Marc.

3. The four beings as transmitters of divine inspiration

The four-winged beings, man, lion, ox and eagle, usually called evangelist symbols, originally come from the Old Testament and the Apocalypse. The prophet Ezekiel describes how the hand of God came upon him with a cloud of fire. In it appeared ‘quattuor animalia’ (‘four beings’) with four faces, that of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle (Ez. 1:5–12). Similarly, the Apocalypse speaks of the appearance of God whose throne is surrounded by four beings (Rev. 4:6, 8). Since the second century, these four companions of God’s throne had been understood as evangelist symbols.¹⁶ Moreover, in the canonisation debate, the number of four *animalia* was an argument for also establishing the number of the Gospels. In Jerome’s *Plures-fuisse* prologue, both aspects are explicitly cited. Jerome sees the number of four *animalia* as an argument for the fourfold Gospel: ‘Haec igitur quattuor evangelia multo ante praedicta Hiezechielis quoque volumen probat.’ (‘So also, the Book of Ezekiel proves these four Gospels, which had accordingly been predicted much earlier’). He then assigns each of the beings to an evangelist, the man, who was often understood as an angel because of his wings, to Matthew, the lion to Mark, the ox to Luke and the eagle to John.¹⁷

In the art of early Christianity and the Middle Ages, therefore, the four evangelists were continuously shown together with the four *animalia*, each of which clearly identifies one of the enthroned evangelists. However, from the late eighth and ninth centuries CE, the role of the four *animalia* was fundamentally changed by Carolingian artists. They were no longer statically represented symbolic beings identifying the evangelists, but they were shown acting actively and dynamically above the evangelists.

3.1 The Godescalc Gospel Lectionary

Between the years 781 and 783 CE, a Gospel lectionary (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France [from now on BnF], Ms. nouv. acq. lat. 1203) was written by a scribe Godescalc on behalf of Emperor Charlemagne (c. 747–814 CE) and his wife Hildegard (c. 758–783 CE). Godescalc calls the lectionary an ‘opus eximium’ (‘an outstanding work’) in a dedicatory poem at the end of the manuscript.¹⁸ It is considered the first of the precious liturgical manuscripts initiated by Charlemagne,

with which a new era of medieval manuscript culture began. At the beginning of this early Carolingian manuscript, four full-page images of the evangelists follow one after the other. They do not use the column-arch scheme, but the other variant in which the evangelist and symbolic being are shown in a rectangular frame. Even in this early Carolingian manuscript, the aforementioned dynamization is clearly realised. It concerns not only the four *animalia*, but also the evangelists themselves. In very different postures and with sometimes lively movements, they are enthroned on benches with voluminous, embroidered cushions, their feet resting on gilded footstools. All of them are accompanied by an opened book. The writing utensils, such as inkwell and quill, are not missing either. Nevertheless, and this is crucial in the context here, none of these four authors is really absorbed in the writing process. Rather, their attention is focused on their relationship with their symbolic beings. Thus, Matthew and his angel (fol. 1^v) are connected in a dialogue. Luke’s ox (fol. 2^r) pushes down from above on the right, so that the evangelist has to avoid it with his upper body. Nevertheless, the nimbs of the two collide with each other. This is also the case in Mark’s image (fol. 1^v), although here the evangelist turns his head back in order to be able to make eye contact with the lion (Fig. 1).

John opens the book with one hand while he dips the pen into the inkpot with the other (fol. 2^v). At the same time, however, he looks up at the eagle. In these differentiated postures and movements there is one constant: the writing and reading desks with the opened book placed next to the evangelists. It is always in the right half of the picture, demonstratively spread out, four times in approximately the same slanted position. This clearly sets the desk apart from the parallel lines of the background and emphatically directs the viewer’s gaze to the opened books, in which the opening words of the respective Gospel can be read in golden script. As just described, however, the evangelists are not actively writing the text of the Gospels themselves because they are focused on their relationship with their symbolic beings. The *animalia*, in turn, move energetically from above towards the heads of the evangelists. From this constellation it follows that the text of the Gospels is not genuinely due to the evangelists themselves, but to the action of their symbolic beings. Through them, the divine inspiration granted to the

¹⁶ Nilgen 1968, 696–697; 1973, 520–525.

¹⁷ De Bruyne 1920/2015, 156.

¹⁸ Köhler 1958, 22–28; Reudenbach 1998; Crivello, Denoël, and Orth 2011.



Fig. 2: Gospels of Saint-Médard de Soissons, early 9th c. CE. Paris, BnF, lat. 8850, fol. 17v: Evangelist Matthew.

evangelists becomes comprehensible.¹⁹ Following the figures of inspiration, which already appear occasionally in ancient author images, the evangelists' symbols function here as bearers and transmitters of God's word. Their former origin as signs of God's presence, accompanying his appearance on his throne, thus comes into play again. God himself as the primordial and actual origin of the Gospels remains invisible in the image, but his presence is indicated by the four *animalia*. They convey the message coming from the divine originator to the evangelists. The evangelists are thus shown as authors of the four gospels, literary narratives, which they do not write through their own initiative and creativity, but through divine commission. Through the symbolic beings God himself inspires them to write these texts.

3.2 *The Gospels of Saint Médard de Soissons*

In the Gospel books of the Carolingian court scriptorium that follow the Godescalc Gospel Lectionary, the evangelists are presented in a column-arch scheme rather than in a rectangular frame. Although the placement of the *animalia* in the arched field results in a stronger spatial separation from the evangelists enthroned below and flanked by columns, the concern to distinguish between the divine origin of the texts and the authorship of the evangelists by showing the inspiration through the *animalia* cannot be overlooked here either. This can be exemplified in the image of Matthew (Fig. 2) in the Gospels of Saint-Médard de Soissons (Paris, BnF, lat. 8850) which was made about two decades after the Godescalc Gospel Lectionary and is considered a high point of Carolingian manuscript production at Charlemagne's court.²⁰

The image of Matthew (fol. 17^v) completely follows the column-arch scheme in the arrangement of the seated evangelist and the symbol shown above, while breaking up the strictness of the composition by placing the seat of Matthew diagonally in the space of the picture. At the same time, the upward boundary is broken by the nimbus of the evangelist and the book in the hands of the angel. In the other evangelist images of the Soissons Gospels, the *animalia* also hold and present books or scrolls; in addition, as in the Godescalc Gospel Lectionary, a writing desk with an opened Gospel book is shown next to Matthew, Mark and Luke, while John presents the open book on his lap to the

viewers. As can be seen in Matthew's image, there are no dynamic encounters with direct contact between evangelist and symbol. Nevertheless, their relationship to each other is intensified by a parallelisation of their appearance. The evangelist is clothed in a blue outer garment, the angel wears an undergarment of the same colour. Like the evangelist, the angel is also turned to the right, with the same inclination of the head and also with his right arm outstretched. The arm directs the gaze on the one hand to the angel's book, but at the same time points somewhat downwards, to the book of Matthew, in which the evangelist writes with the quill in his outstretched right hand.

Matthew is actually writing here; his gaze is directed towards his book. At the same time, however, a gesture formed by his left hand, which can perhaps be understood as a sign of vision and concentration, points upwards to the angel. In contrast to Matthew, the angel is not writing; rather, he is opening the book, which is directly above the evangelist's book and in approximately the same oblique position. In the angel's book, the beginning of Matthew's Gospel 'Liber generationis IHV XRI' ('The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ') is clearly legible.²¹ From the angel, the text of the Gospel goes into the Gospel book on Matthew's desk below. The evangelist follows what the angel indicates and this is visualised by the posture of his body, but also by the parallel position of the books.

In the Soissons Gospels, the direct superimposition of two open books, one belonging to the symbolic being, the other lying on the evangelist's desk, is also carefully staged in the image of Mark (fol. 81^v) and that of Luke (fol. 123^v). In the image of John (fol. 180^v), the eagle spreads out a scroll above the evangelist with the opening words of John's Gospel, to which the book on John's lap, open to the viewers, responds like an echo. Here, the entire series of the four evangelist images is thus also concerned with the theme of divine inspiration. The contact between the inspiring *animalia* and the evangelists is demonstrated by compositional analogies, but also by motifs of movement, such as the violent turn of Mark's head upwards towards the lion, who points his book directly at the evangelist's nimbus and head. A special emphasis is placed on the presentation of written media, scroll and book. As attributes of the *animalia*, the books illustrate the heavenly origin of the text, which is materially and preciously concretised in the Gospel book written by the evangelists.

¹⁹ To this iconography cf. Weisbach 1936; Bloch 1973, 468–478; Krause 2011; to the Godescalc-Evangelistary cf. Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1956, 84; Mütterich 1965, 33; Nordenfalk 1983, 134–135; Weisbach 1936.

²⁰ Köhler 1958, 70–82; Diebold 2018.

²¹ Brenk 1993/1994, 663.

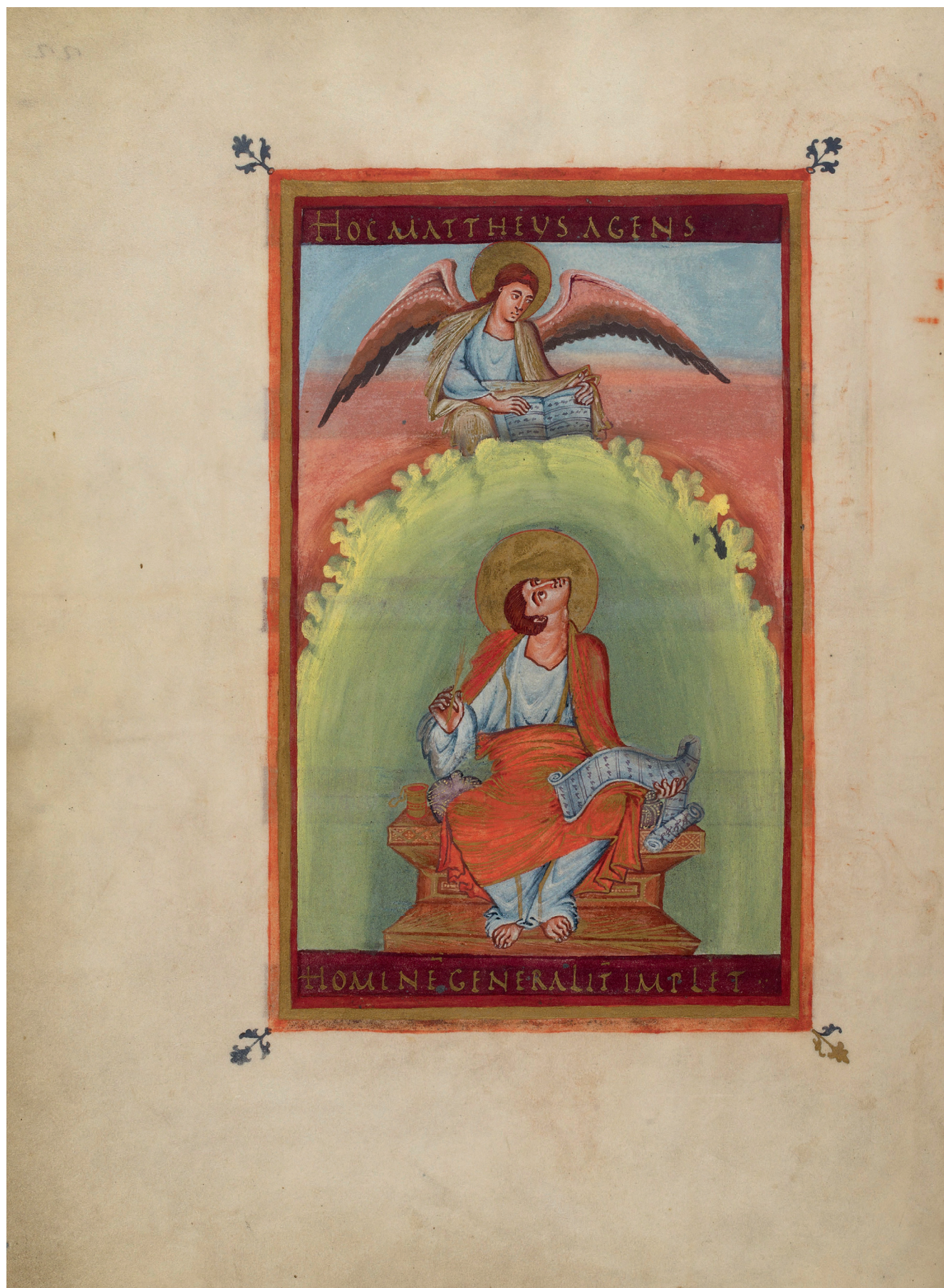


Fig. 3: Gospels of Lothair, Tour, 849/851 CE. Paris, BnF, lat 266, fol. 22r: Evangelist Matthew.

3.3 *The Gospels of Lothair*

The choice of the column-arch scheme is not to be understood as a developmental step, but as another option for the arrangement of evangelist and symbolic being. Both in this scheme and in the rectangular frame, the illustration of the inspiring encounter of symbol and evangelist is realised with ever-new variants in the following centuries. In the precious Gospel book (Paris, BnF, ms. lat 266), which was written around the middle of the ninth century CE in the famous scriptorium of the monastery of Saint-Martin in Tours for Emperor Lothair I (795–855 CE), the choice again fell on a rectangular picture field.²² In it, structuring architecture is completely omitted, as are further attributes such as desks and writing tools. Only the seated evangelists and their symbolic beings can be seen here. The scene is thus entirely concentrated on their relationship to each other, which is staged in a highly expressive manner, especially in Matthew and Mark. All four evangelists are positioned on the central axis and surrounded by a kind of coloured cloud whose frayed upper edge is shaped like a semicircle with the symbolic being appearing at the apex.

In the image of Matthew (fol. 22^v), the angel is sitting with his wings spread out, holding an opened book in front of him and showing it to the evangelist in the area below him (Fig. 3). Matthew is about to write on a scroll, but has interrupted the writing process to turn his head far back and look up at the angel and the book presented to him.

Very similarly, Mark and his lion (fol. 75^v) and John and the eagle (fol. 171^v) are related to each other by highly concentrated gazes. Only Luke (fol. 112^v) turns his back on his ox and is completely absorbed in writing, while he is being observed by the intense gaze of the ox. The fact that here the correspondence between symbols and evangelists is also to be understood as inspiration becomes clear not only from the postures and movements just mentioned.

At the beginning of this Gospel book (fol. 2^v), a *Maiestas Domini* (Fig. 4) follows after Lothair's portrait. In a mandorla, Christ appears enthroned frontally on a globe, surrounded by the four *animalia* in the four corners between the mandorla and the rectangular frame. In this way they are presented as signs of God, who function as bearers of divine inspiration in the following images of the evangelists.

It is certainly no coincidence that the Carolingians in particular showed such great interest in the display of the inspired evangelists and found such striking solutions for illustrating them. It is obvious to see this in connection with the concerns of the Carolingian reforms.²³ Their concern for correct and authentic textual versions of the Holy Scriptures is thus reflected in each Gospel book, in that the divine origin of these texts is assured in the image at the beginning of each Gospel. This is all the truer when Christ himself speaks of the evangelists in the book. In Matthew's image of the Soissons Gospels, as shown above, the angel presents the beginning of the Gospel; in Matthew's book, however, a verse from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:20) is written in gold lettering and can be read clearly: 'Thesaurizate vobis thesauros in caelo' ('lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven'). The theological and political implications of this verse, which clearly refers to the characteristics of the Soissons Gospels as a precious treasure object, cannot be explained here.²⁴ In the context here, however, it is important that in this way Christ himself speaks to the viewers through the painted text; the painted Gospel book, which also means the Soissons Gospel Book itself, is thus identified as the authentic Word of God.

3.4 *The Gospels St. Maria ad Gradus in Cologne*

Especially in the Carolingian period, attractive artistic solutions were found for this task to differentiate between the originator of the Word of God and the authors of the Gospels and, at the same time, to illustrate their close relationship in order to prove the Gospels to be the authentic Word of God. They remained effective for a long time, even without the political and theological Carolingian context. An orientation towards these solutions is shown, to name just one example, by the Gospel book produced in Cologne around 1030, which comes from the former church of St. Maria ad Gradus in Cologne (Köln, Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- u. Dombibliothek, cod. 1001a).

The stage for the evangelists here is formed by elaborately detailed architecture, the gable wall of which is shaped as a large golden rectangle in which the evangelist is enthroned. The four beings rush down on the evangelists from above. They hold a large scroll which unfolds downwards and reaches to the evangelists' laps. The symbolic beings and

²³ McKitterick 1989; Angenendt 1992.

²⁴ Brenk 1993/1994, 663–665.

²² Köhler 1933, 71–85; Mütterich and Gaehde 1976, 82–87.



Fig. 4: Gospels of Lothair, Tours, 849/851 CE. Paris, BnF, lat 266, fol. 2^r: Maiestas Domini.

the evangelists are therefore not each given their own books; rather, the text of the Gospels is passed directly from the symbols to the evangelists as a scroll.

Therefore, writing desks as well as inkwells are missing. Matthew (fol. 21^v) (Fig. 5), Luke (fol. 122^r) and John (fol. 177^v) have indeed placed their quill on the rotulus as if writing; however, this is already finished with the opening words of the Gospel inscribed in golden script. Thus, Mark (fol. 84^v) dispenses entirely with hints of writing and instead looks urgently upwards at his lion.

Inspiration as an actual spiritual process becomes a rather material one here: the immediate handing over of the scroll already inscribed with the text of the Gospel. However, this illustrates all the more clearly that the text is not owed to the evangelists as authors, but had already been formulated by God in heaven and delivered by the symbols. Incidentally, their character as companions and signs of God is also evoked at the beginning of the manuscript by the image of the *Maiestas Domini* with the four *animalia* (fol. 1^v).

4. Images of the Evangelists and the transmission process from God to medieval scribes

The evangelist images discussed here as examples are thus about looking back to the supernatural origin of the Word of God and its transmission to the evangelists. God is the first and original originator, while the evangelists, as subordinate human authors, write their texts driven by the reception of divine inspiration – ‘sancto instigante spiritu’, as it is said in Luke’s *argumentum*.²⁵ However, this is only one thematic aspect of these images, which concerns the content of the Gospel books and opens up a historical dimension of these images, so to speak. This dimension coincides with the paratexts accompanying the Gospels, which refer back to the early Christian canonisation debate and to selective aspects of the textual transmission. The beginning of this history is shown in the evangelist images as a largely spiritual process. However, this is often supplemented by a view of the continuation of this history of transmission in the respective present, in which the Gospel text is permanently copied and rewritten. The inspiration at the historical beginning, where the content of the Gospels is established, is joined by the ever-new materialisation in the continuation of the transmission. Thus, the material side of writing can also become an important theme of the evangelist images.

²⁵ Cf. n. 9.

The direct handing over of the scrolls in the Cologne Gospels significantly connects inspiration with the material object and brings this to a sharper point when the evangelists write what had already been written in heaven (Fig. 5). In these images, therefore, the scenery of a scriptorium is dispensed with. In others, however, despite the concentration on inspiration, writing and reading desks can be seen, as well as evangelists dipping the pen into an inkpot or checking the condition of the pen, and finally also the writing itself and the presentation of the finished books or scrolls, often preciously decorated with gold or purple.²⁶

The activities of the evangelists in the images are thus often the same as those of the scribes and painters who created these images and wrote the Gospel books. In this way, the evangelists can be perceived less as authors of texts and more as scribes and painters involved in the making of manuscripts. They become figures of identification and role models for the medieval scribes, who thus place themselves in the succession of the evangelists. For the concept of many Gospel books, this means that the images of the evangelists at the beginning of each Gospel cannot be regarded solely as author images for the presentation and identification of the authors. These images react to the contradictory constellation of understanding a text written by human authors as divine teaching and the Word of God. They present and illustrate precisely and in a differentiated manner the distinction between originator, author and scribe.

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²⁶ Cf. n. 14; Mütterich 1965, 36–39; Bloch 1973, 468; Brenk 1993/1994, 644–645.

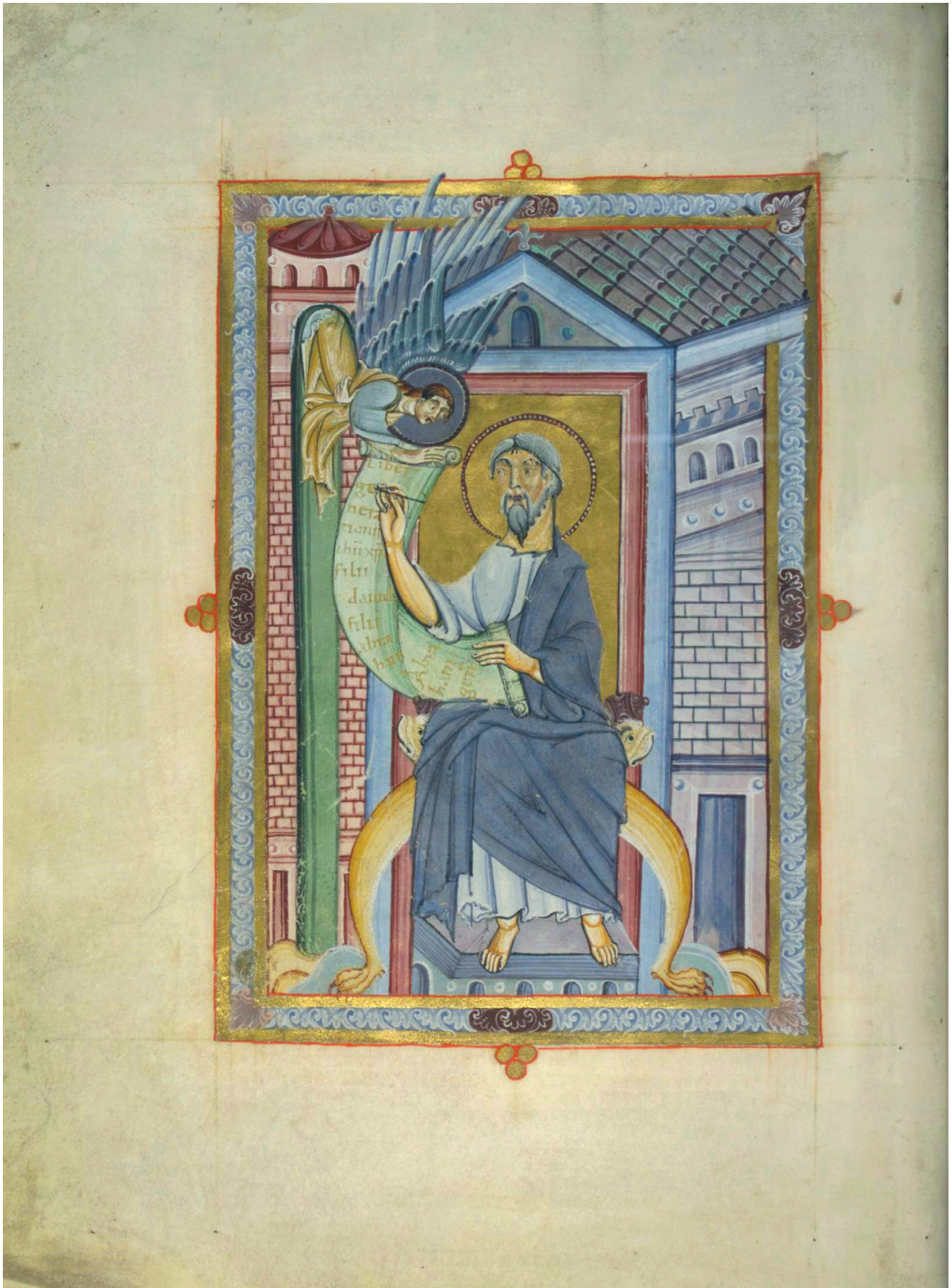


Fig. 5: Gospel book from St. Maria ad Gradus, Cologne, c. 1030 CE. Cologne, Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- u. Dombibliothek, cod. 1001a, fol. 21^v: Evangelist Matthew.

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