

RUDOLF STEINER
AND THE FIFTH GOSPEL

*Insights into a New Understanding
of the Christ Mystery*

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The knowledge in the souls of Christ's apostles gradually condensed into the four Gospels. In what he called the Fifth Gospel, however, Rudolf Steiner pointed to what throbbed in the apostles' hearts but had not yet been recorded in words.

The Fifth Gospel is the apostles' true testimony, not in the sense of a written record but in the sense of consciousness imbued with the Holy Spirit.

— ANDREI BELY¹

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1.

“I owed it to the Fifth Gospel, which I hold sacred.”

Rudolf Steiner and the Lectures on the Fifth Gospel

When we experience such impressions, their effect on our souls is so shattering that we do not immediately feel the need to dwell on them too much. We also soon sense that they cannot be fathomed with human thoughts; we find our thinking inadequate for approaching them. These impressions, however, not only entrench themselves in our souls but become an intrinsic part of our soul-life. Our connection to the part of the soul that has accumulated such experiences is then felt as a connection to the experiences themselves, which we continue to carry with us through life (70f.).*

ON OCTOBER 1, 1913, Rudolf Steiner began his lecture cycle on the Fifth Gospel in Kristiania, after having announced the series to members of the Anthroposophical Society a few months earlier, in August 1913:

*The number in the parentheses after quotations indicates the page number in the German edition of *Aus der Akasha-Forschung. Das Fünfte Evangelium* (GA 148). The English translation is available through SteinerBooks as *The Fifth Gospel: From the Akashic Record*. Quotations from other GA works are indicated by (000, 000; GA number, page number), or a superscript and then identified in the Notes with the English edition title when available.

“From the Akashic Record: The Fifth Gospel.” The title was announced in Munich. We were all uncertain what it meant, but at least a majority of those present assumed that the cycle would tackle contemporary Gospel criticism—a very interesting subject in the traditional academic sense, but not the same as “Threshold of the Spiritual World” [lecture cycle in Munich, August 24–31, 1913].⁶ The Threshold was worth a trip to Munich, or even much further, but dragging ourselves all the way to Norway for a critique, especially in the fall, when we all had our hands full with the beginning of a new season, was a different matter. There were only a few signatures on the sign-up sheet. (Andrei Bely)⁷

Ultimately, however, Russian author Andrei Bely and his spouse Assya Turgenieff did decide to follow Rudolf Steiner to Norway. “People were saying that he had chosen Kristiania so that his words could be as fully spirit-imbued as possible. Supposedly the atmosphere in Norway was especially pure, whereas a denser aura overshadowed Germany.”⁸ Rudolf Steiner’s choice of the Scandinavian city for his first exposition of this unusual subject was indeed very deliberate. He had lectured there almost yearly since 1908, often on Christological subjects.⁹ In the summer of 1910, in the concluding lecture of a major lecture cycle in Kristiania, he mentioned that this Nordic region offered the “best conditions” for understanding present and future revelations of the Christ (95). Bely estimated that in the end, between two and three hundred people (the Norwegian friends of anthroposophy plus a few foreigners who had made the trip specifically for that purpose) were in the audience as Rudolf Steiner began the cycle on the Fifth Gospel on October 1, 1913—“here with you, specifically,” as Steiner himself put it (37).

“How the fjord sparkles between lectures! How the stars twinkle after the lecture!” Bely noted.¹⁰

Three and a half years earlier, Rudolf Steiner already used the term “Fifth Gospel” in a lecture (unfortunately inadequately stenographed) given shortly before Whitsun in Palermo, Italy. There, on his way back from Rome and Monte Cassino, the site of the first monastery founded by Benedict of Nursia and the childhood home of Thomas Aquinas, Rudolf Steiner spoke on the subject of the impending appearance of the Christ “in the etheric,” i.e., the growing perceptibility of the Christ-Being in his etheric body. Steiner had first mentioned this event four months before, in early 1910, in Scandinavia.¹¹ Among other subjects he broached in Palermo, Steiner spoke of the Rosicrucian movement as a “Christ movement.”¹² He stated that the Rosicrucian community had been preparing to perceive the Christ in the etheric for many centuries, and in this connection he said:

In addition to the four Gospels, Rosicrucian teachings included a fifth, a spiritual gospel that made it possible to understand the other four. In the twentieth century, this gospel will be given to a portion of the human race just as the four others were given in connection with the Christ’s first appearance. Rosicrucian adherents with the necessary clarity of consciousness will understand the significance of this gospel for humankind.¹³

On October 11, 1911, in the major lecture cycle “From Jesus to Christ” (held in Karlsruhe two years before the Kristiania course on the Fifth Gospel), Rudolf Steiner mentioned that in addition to the four Gospel texts, other means of perceiving the “Christian mysteries” had long existed. In the future, according to Steiner, the “appearance of the Christ in the etheric” would make possible “direct perception of the importance and the essence of the Christ Jesus.”¹⁴

Even before that event, however, two approaches to the Christ-Mystery were already possible:

One source consists of the Gospels and everything that flowed from them and traditions based on them. The other source of knowledge exists because there were always clairvoyant individuals who could see into the higher worlds and bring back their own perceptions of the realities of the Christ-Event, as if from an everlasting Gospel, and share them with others.¹⁵

In the early years of the twentieth century, Rudolf Steiner began to illuminate events in Palestine at the beginning of the Christian Era from the perspective of supersensible research into the “spiritual script”—as he called it—of the Akashic Record. In particular, he presented details about the mystery of the Christ-Being and his sacrificial devotion and connection to earthly destiny. Steiner first broached this subject in *Christianity as Mystical Fact*.¹⁶ Over the next decade, this book was followed by major lecture cycles on the individual Gospels.¹⁷ Rudolf Steiner repeatedly reinterpreted passages by the four evangelists or even “reproduced” the original spiritual form of these texts on the basis of the “spiritual script.” In October 1911 in Karlsruhe, he explained:

To discover how traditional versions must be read, we must compare them to their original forms. Any purely text-based tradition is bound to go astray and fall into error. In future, it will not be enough to simply explain the Gospels; they will need to be reproduced in their true, original forms, which will then prove the truth of what the texts present, as has already been demonstrated with regard to many passages.¹⁸

In Karlsruhe, Rudolf Steiner did not elaborate on the term Fifth Gospel, coined in Palermo, and so the question remains open whether it is identical to the “everlasting gospel” accessible to spiritual perception during supersensible experiences. Ten days before the beginning of the advertised course in Kristiania,

however, Rudolf Steiner again mentioned the Fifth Gospel, totally unexpectedly and with great intensity and different emphasis, in his address at the laying of the foundation stone of the Dornach *Johannesbau* as a new mystery center for a modern, independent “School of Spiritual Science.” In this address, referring explicitly to the spiritual situation at the beginning of the Christian Era, Rudolf Steiner asserted the urgent need for a new spiritual science, saying that “humanity’s vague longing and hoping for the spirit” was perceptible as a “cry” waiting for an answer.¹⁹ This answer, he said, “can be provided wherever spiritual science can prevail with its gospel that proclaims the spirit.”²⁰ In his half-hour address at the laying of the foundation stone, Steiner gave an extremely condensed outline of the spiritual conflict of our time, highlighting the historical movement of Christianity from East to West, the centuries-long westward “migration” of its dissemination, and the—yearningly anticipated—“answer,” that is, the essential future task of western Christ-Gnosis.²¹ He then said:

From the east came the light and the word of proclamation. From the east, it moved westward, proclaimed in four ways by the four Gospels, waiting to be reflected with insight and understanding in the mirror of the west. Our hearts and souls are deeply affected when we hear the words of the Sermon on the Mount, spoken at a time when the human personality had matured, the old spirit light had faded, and the new spirit light was appearing. Once it appeared, however, this new spirit light moved westward for centuries as humanity’s evolution continued, waiting for understanding of the words that once sounded in human hearts at the Sermon on the Mount. The eternal prayer spoken to proclaim the Cosmic Word as the Mystery of Golgotha took place resounds from the depths of our cosmic evolution. From the depths of the human soul it resounds, proclaiming the mystery of existence to the microcosm. In the “Our Father,” the cosmic word was

meant to resound from east to west, but as it sank into the microcosm, it was still waiting for a time when it would resound together with the Fifth Gospel. Human souls still had to mature before they could understand that most ancient and macrocosmic gospel, which is now meant to echo in response to the microcosmic gospel of the east.

When we face the present moment with understanding, we will also begin to understand that a fifth gospel can be added to the four others.²²

That macrocosmic Fifth Gospel, said Rudolf Steiner in Dornach on the evening of September 20, is the urgently anticipated “gospel of gnosis” that is becoming possible now and will be increasingly possible in the future.²³ A short time later, the course advertised as “From the Akashic Record: The Fifth Gospel” began in Kristiania.

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Rudolf Steiner held five lectures in Kristiania and gave follow-up presentations in eight German cities, ending on January 13, 1914.²⁴ Quite surprisingly, and contrary to Andrei Bely’s original expectations, all of these lectures were shaped exclusively by their *contents*: the life of Jesus of Nazareth from age twelve onward and the three earthly years of Christ Jesus until his death on Golgotha. In Kristiania and in later recapitulations and partial extrapolations on this theme in Germany, Rudolf Steiner made no attempt to cover anthroposophical Christology in its entirety. Instead, he made his audiences aware of the relationship between the “realities of the Fifth Gospel” and the unique “earthly life of the Christ” (161, 40). He added, “It is to be hoped that in time these realities will converge into a fifth gospel of sorts” (243). Although Rudolf Steiner had been dealing with the Gospels and the being of the Christ in published works and lectures since the beginning of the twentieth century,

his accounts of the Fifth Gospel were the first to encompass the Christ-Event “in the concrete reality” of events that took place in Palestine (217).²⁵ The lectures on the Fifth Gospel also were able to describe the Mystery of Golgotha in much greater detail because they were based on “observing the actual life of Christ Jesus” (73). This approach, Steiner said, “leads us even deeper into the nature of the Christ-Being.”^{26, 27} In this connection, Steiner characterized his earlier Christological lectures as “abstract,” even “theoretical and thought-based” (217, 324). On December 17, 1913, in Cologne, he explained:

I might say that to date, *the content of my discussions* of the Mystery of Golgotha, although based on esotericism, were also theoretical. I talked about the essence and significance of the Mystery of Golgotha as the central event in humanity’s earthly evolution. My thoughts on the centrality of this event certainly sprang from the sources of esoteric research, from sources that radiate from the Mystery of Golgotha itself, so to speak, and come alive in our earthly evolution as it progresses. In the phenomena of humanity’s evolution, the seer’s gaze discovers the significance of the Mystery of Golgotha as I presented it previously.

Now, however, it is incumbent on me to speak in concrete detail about events that took place at the beginning of the Christian Era (283, italics added).

At present, according to Rudolf Steiner, it was both necessary and possible to present a “much more graphic picture of the activity of Christ Jesus,” a much more conscious understanding of the figure of Christ Jesus,” or even “spiritual insight into the person of Jesus of Nazareth” (120, 219) “The perspective is this: in our time, it is truly necessary to renew our understanding of the Christ Jesus, to take a new look at what actually happened in Palestine in the Mystery of Golgotha” (207)

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Rudolf Steiner understood the content of his lectures on the Fifth Gospel as *communications* from the Fifth Gospel, as ways of conveying contents that were part of and acquired from the Akashic Record: “I intend to present these facts exactly as they are found in what we call the Akashic Record, and people can think whatever they like about them” (158). Rudolf Steiner certainly did not compose the text of a new gospel himself and then make people aware of it. Rather, he lectured “on the basis” of the Fifth Gospel, taking a consistent, narrative approach to reporting from the “everlasting script” and simply describing “what can be read in this Fifth Gospel” (56, 94). He spoke in the same way of “narratives from the life of Jesus of Nazareth,” narratives with the character of proclamations: “This is the proclamation of the Fifth Gospel” (56, 50). In Stuttgart on November 22, 1913, he said: “I beg you to take this account as a Fifth Gospel of sorts, a gospel that is given to our time just as the other four gospels were given in their time” (221). Similarly, in the concluding lecture of the Norwegian cycle, he says, “Please note that I am telling the story of the Fifth Gospel, and it would serve no purpose to immediately begin looking for contradictions between it and the other four Gospels. I am simply telling you about things as they appear in the Fifth Gospel” (88f.).

In Kristiania and in the follow-up lectures, Rudolf Steiner repeatedly emphasized the provisional nature of his accounts.²⁸ These results of his current research, he said, were subject to possible later correction, completion, and refinement, due in good part to growing insight into the “everlasting script” and to his expanding perception as spiritual circumstances changed:

In the near future, a time will come when we will be able to speak more exactly. Much of what we now perceive in the spiritual chronicle of becoming is merely suggestive, and we may be able to recognize it much more precisely in the

future. [...] Hence my specific request that you take what I have to say on this occasion only as a stimulus of sorts, as something that will certainly be expressed much better and more precisely in the future (37).

No one who dares to speak today about the mysteries of Christianity should remain unaware of the fact that in a relatively short time, anything that can be said today about the most profound truths of humanity's evolution will prove to be incomplete.

In Kristiania and later, Rudolf Steiner added an obligatory caveat to specific individual descriptions from the Fifth Gospel, pointing to the inherent degree of uncertainty in these aspects of his presentations.³⁰ He also commented on any subjects in need of further research.³¹ For the rest, he regarded his initial descriptions simply as the first elements in the intended overall picture that was both spiritually possible and demanded by the situation of the times. At the end of the course in Kristiania, he said:

Much more could still be said on the basis of this Fifth Gospel. In the course of humanity's evolution, however, the remaining parts of this gospel will certainly appear. These isolated accounts were simply an attempt to give you an impression of what the Fifth Gospel is like (96).

Once thoroughly researched in all its coherence and completeness, the Fifth Gospel was meant to be written down and therefore be as accessible as the other four Gospels: "A written version of this Fifth Gospel does not yet exist, but certainly will at some point in humanity's future" (9).

In Kristiania, Rudolf Steiner's comments in this regard were thoroughly optimistic. Clearly, he would have been able to continue his presentations at that point—that is, he had already researched additional contents of the Fifth Gospel in the

“spiritual script.”³² His increasingly reserved tone in the lectures in Germany, however, cannot be overlooked. The specific continuations mentioned in Kristiania—for example, the background to the Sermon on the Mount—never materialized, and follow-up lectures included little new content.³³ By the end of 1913, Rudolf Steiner was considerably more circumspect about the possibility of revealing the complete Fifth Gospel and setting it down in writing—“*perhaps*” his presentations from the Fifth Gospel could be continued, he said in Cologne on December 18 (324). “*Perhaps*” further elaborations on the Fifth Gospel would follow (Berlin, Epiphany 1914) (158). The conceptual dynamics and perspectives of Steiner’s presentations had become appreciably more restrained by the time he concluded his lecturing on the Fifth Gospel in January 1914 (see chapter 3 in this book).

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As Rudolf Steiner put it, “I have managed to extract a few important contents regarding the life of Christ Jesus from the so-called Akashic Record, which we have often mentioned” (220). Steiner obtained these “accounts from the Fifth Gospel” through “esoteric study,” through deep immersion and intuitive insight into the substance of the Akashic Record, the “everlasting script” (220). Rudolf Steiner had used the term “Akashic Record” as early as 1904.³⁴ According to Steiner, spiritual experiences and accomplishments of human beings on earth are inscribed in the substance of this record.³⁵ In it, these accomplishments are preserved by spiritual beings and can also be experienced, since they become accessible to the perception and memory of esoterically developed individuals. According to Rudolf Steiner, the written versions of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired by the Akashic Record rather than by earthly recollections of eye witnesses: “The four Gospels actually came about in the same way as the fifth, only the fifth appeared two thousand years later” (218).