

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 2--THE MAKING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The books of the New Testament, of which there are 27, were written between 50 and 150 A.D. The New Testament writings were only a small part of the literary output of the early Church.¹ It took centuries before the Church came to general agreement about which books to include. Not until 367 A. D., as part of Athanasius's Easter Letter, had anyone listed the 27 New Testament books as canonical in a definite and unambiguous way.

Scholars continue to differ widely as to the sequence of events by which the Four Gospels came into being. At the earliest stage, most information about Jesus' life and teachings was passed on by word of mouth. Material began to be written down quite early, however. It is difficult to date the Four Gospels as such, because of differing layers of tradition, both oral and written, which are significant before each Gospel reached its final form. For example, see the chart on page 48 of Jesus: The Evidence, for the different datings proposed by two scholars, John A. T. Robinson and Werner Kummel. Even the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas existed in at least two editions.

Before discussing the traits of each Gospel, we will briefly consider the political and cultural conditions in Palestine at the beginning of the Christian Era.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN PALESTINE IN JESUS' DAY

Palestine was subservient to the Roman Empire as the Christian Era began. When Herod the Great died, probably in 4 B.C., the Romans under Augustus divided his kingdom among his three sons. Herod, in a worldly sense, ruled with a power and magnificence that entitled him to the name of Herod the Great. He became undisputed master of Palestine, and remained so until his death. He was a great builder, and Palestine in his day manifested a degree of prosperity that it never possessed at any other time. The building of the Temple was a gift to the Jews, by which he hoped to placate them. All over Palestine today, there are evidences of the great architectural works: the aqueducts, temples, port facilities, and theatres which made his reign one of outward splendor.

The province of Judea was one of three which had been left to Herod's son, Archelaus. He went to Rome to have his kingship confirmed by Caesar Augustus. The Emperor, however, was pulled two ways. Since Herod the Great had been loyal to Rome, and rewarding loyal service was part of Augustus's code of honor, in a sense it seemed right to grant Archelaus's request. On the other hand, he had information which cast serious doubt upon Archelaus's fitness to rule. So Augustus decided on a compromise. Archelaus received about half of Herod's realm, including Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, but had to be content with the title of ethnarch, which had a lower rank than king. Subsequently, he proved unfit to rule, and Judea was made an imperial province. It thus came under direct control of the Emperor, who appointed procurators or governors.

They had supreme authority in major matters, but the ordinary civil laws were in charge of Jewish courts. The Sanhedrin consisted of 71 men chosen from the leading Jewish families. Its chief task was to administer the Jewish laws. Its civil authority was limited to Judea, but its

religious authority extended to other areas, though modern scholars differ about the geographic extent of their religious authority.

The Procurator exercised supreme judicial authority, and handled the finances. As a rule, he interfered little with internal affairs, as long as the Jews kept the peace and paid their taxes regularly. It was the Romans' policy to give the Jews as much freedom as possible, and to guard against stirring up their religious prejudices.

The Jews objected to paying taxes to Rome, considering these a symbol of their subjection to a ruling power. The manner in which the taxes were collected added to their sense of injury, and increased their resentment toward Rome. The "publicans" of the New Testament, as the taxgatherers who contacted the people were called, were subordinate to the Roman officials who more strictly bore the title "publicani." The "publicans" or taxgatherers were dishonest, because they "lined their own pockets" after turning over their quota to the Procurator's agents.

Jesus did his work at a time when revolutionary psychology dominated the situation. Rebellions were common but unsuccessful especially in Galilee which was considered a hotbed of nationalism. Two rebellions, one by Judas [not Iscariot], and another by Theudas, are mentioned in Acts 5:34-39.

Palestine was then a cosmopolitan area. Conflicting currents of life and thought mingled, both Jewish and pagan. Judaism itself was divided into many factions. But this had its positive side, with an abundance of creative thought and literature resulting among the Jews of that era.

Rome remained mistress of her conquered territories by commercial and political alliances with the rulers of these territories, not by military power alone. Her garrisons in Palestine were small, because her real strength lay in her alliances with the priests and wealthy Sadducees. She did not interfere with religion or industry, but offered peace and stability of government, in return for prompt payment of taxes.

The Scribes and the Pharisees, champions of Judaism and of intense nationalism, fought against the corruption of patriotism fostered by Sadducees and priests, and against the forces of paganism. New groups sprang up, pledged to perpetual hatred of Rome. The old Messianic prophecies took on new life, and the Jews earnestly prayed for a political deliverer to free them from Roman rule. All of this is the vivid background of Jesus' life. It helps to explain the enthusiasm of the people when they believed him to be the promised deliverer, and their disappointment when he refused a crown.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The strategic position of Palestine had made it important to Rome, which was represented by her garrisons and rulers. However, representatives of many lands poured into Palestine. Tourists, sightseers, and traders thronged Palestine's prosperous cities, and passed along its colorful highways. Thousands of Greek-speaking Jews--e.g. those who had settled in Alexandria and other Hellenistic cities--visited Jerusalem, especially during the Passover Season, and exerted a strong influence over their homeland.

Although Roman genius for government had made a unit of the Mediterranean world, Hellenism ruled the mind and Greek culture pervaded the Roman Empire. Greek had become the language of commerce, and people spoke Greek in its colloquial form everywhere in the Mediterranean area. The influence of Hellenistic culture upon the Jews who lived in Greek cities, on the shores of the Mediterranean, was very strong. A self-governing confederacy called the Decapolis, made up of ten Hellenistic cities, most of them east of the Jordan, also exerted an influence upon the life and thought of Galilee and Judea.

Most of the New Testament was originally written in Greek. However, the Aramaic background of the Four Gospels is highly significant, because most of their source material--oral and written--was of the Aramaic language and culture. Jesus spoke both Aramaic and Greek, but he spoke Aramaic oftener than he spoke Greek.

An earlier belief, that Hellenistic and Semitic currents of thought were essentially separate and distinct, can no longer be maintained in the light of modern knowledge.

Between the writing of the Old and New Testaments--and partly overlapping both in date--a great body of literature arose which has been divided into two groups, called the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha.² Each collection should be considered as background material for the New Testament. For each sheds considerable light upon the inner life of the Jewish people during this period. Both, likewise, are valuable sources of information for understanding the religion of this period.

THE APOCRYPHA

The word apocrypha means hidden or secret. It was first applied by Jerome (340-1420), one of the most learned scholars of the Latin Church, to designate the Old Testament books which he could not find in the Hebrew Canon. It seems strange that Ecclesiasticus, which is a major source for the Jewish wisdom tradition and has much excellent material, should have been left out of the Hebrew Canon while Ecclesiastes, with its gloomy discourses, was retained. The various books, which also include additions to the Old Testament books of Daniel and Esther, are valuable as background material for the intertestamental period.

THE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

The word Pseudepigrapha (pseudes = false; epi = upon; graphe = a writing) consists of a group of books which were written late in the pre-Christian era and early in the Christian era. These works were falsely attributed to great Israelites of the past. They did not necessarily do so to deceive, but more likely to give weight or authority to them. The people of that era had different standards of ethics than today, with respect to attributing literary works to various individuals. This fact complicates the issues regarding the authorship of New Testament books.

THE SEPTUAGINT

After the exile, the Jewish people became divided into three groups, generally speaking. While a group of the exiles returned to Palestine, a substantial number of Jews remained in Babylonia and were absorbed into the life of that country. A third and still larger group settled in Egypt. Many of these Jews became wealthy and cultured, as well as being devout. It was due to their efforts that the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek about 250 B.C. in Alexandria. The Greek version came to be known as the Septuagint or Seventy because of a tradition, wholly unfounded, that it was produced by 70 rabbis in as many days, each making a separate version, and all agreeing perfectly.

The Septuagint, which included the books later designated as “apocrypha,” became the Bible of the early Church. Paul, and the author of Matthew, quoted the Septuagint as authority.

TRAITS OF THE GOSPELS

THE GOSPEL OF MARK - Mark consists of brief, vivid, powerful narratives, emphasizing Jesus’ actions. It includes a series of conflict stories with Jesus and the Pharisees as antagonists, representing opposing levels of consciousness. It is also our best source for the facts of his healing ministry, giving a plausible and coherent account which is analogous with modern experience in the healing field. Most of the healing accounts may be based upon an even earlier written document.

Early church tradition tells us that Mark received most of his information concerning Jesus and his teaching from Peter, whose disciple he was; also, that Mark was careful to quote accurately all that was said and done by Jesus, as related by Peter. It is possible, however, that Mark used an earlier text which he added to--a kind of drama that someone else had written during the persecution of Christians by the Pharisees. This persecution peaked during the reign of Herod Agrippa (a grandson of Herod the Great), in Judea, from 41-44 A.D. John Mark, with additional information from Peter, may have later revised and added to this text to agree with its present form.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW - Although first in order in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew was not written as such until after the Gospel of Mark. Apparently the author of Matthew used the Gospel of Mark, substantially as it now exists, as one of his basic literary sources.

It is likely that the compiler of the Gospel of Matthew quoted freely from an earlier sayings source, prepared by the Apostle Matthew. (New Testament scholars call this the Q-Document, from the German word “Quelle” which means “Source.”) Church tradition supports the early existence of such a sayings source. That such a source existed is also supported by the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, another sayings source. The two original sayings sources no doubt included many similar sayings of Jesus, though from a literary standpoint they are completely independent of each other. A comparative study yields conclusive evidence regarding many of the sayings attributed to Jesus.

From (1) the Gospel of Mark, (2) Matthew's sayings source (though in a revised form with other material added), and (3) other source material, the author, a Jewish Christian, developed a biography of Jesus.³ He presents him as the promised Messiah, not only of the Jews but of the entire human race. The teachings are presented systematically, to provide a practical manual of Christian teaching and church policy. This Gospel, probably used by the Christians in Syrian Antioch, was pre-eminently the teaching Gospel. The early Church used it extensively. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is a man of authority--the Great Teacher.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE - This Gospel is attributed to a Greek physician who had been a companion of Paul. His introduction suggests that there were many confusing documents in existence at that time. He is eager to make his friend Theophilus clear as to the facts about Jesus, and the validity of the new religion.

Luke had as sources the Gospel of Mark (perhaps in its earlier, pre-Markan form), Matthew's Sayings Source (in its revised form with other material added), and other sources that were not known to other Gospel writers: quite possibly a parables source, the testimony of eye-witnesses, and a variety of oral traditions. There is much in this Gospel which is not found in the other Gospels, such as the story of Jesus' infancy and youth, and the parables in Luke, Chapter 15. He is our only source for many of Jesus' parables, including the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

This Gospel has a more refined literary style than either Mark or Matthew, many quotations from Mark being replaced by classical Greek words and phrases. It is the humanitarian and social Gospel, presenting the teachings of Jesus which show the basic obligations of the individual to God and humanity.

Although his version of Gospel of Luke the author of Luke was interested in Jesus' healing ministry Jesus' healing work is less reliable than Mark's. For the Gospel of Luke adds a strong emphasis on demonology and possession.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - Since 1945, Biblical scholarship has increasingly supported the validity and early date of the material found in the Gospel of John, though its authorship cannot be proven.⁴ There continues to be much controversy concerning its authorship. It is likely, however, that the Apostle John wrote the original text of the Gospel of John before 70 A.D. Then, around the turn of the First Century A.D., an editor in or near Ephesus made it public for the first time, revising and adding to the text (e.g., restructured the Prologue, added Chapter 21, lengthened the discourses).

Although simple in diction, this Gospel is considered the most profound of all four New Testament Gospels. It is the favorite among many students of New Thought, including Divine Scientists. Its teachings are presented by means of a variety of symbolic images (e.g., the bread of life, the living water, the vine).

The Jewish philosopher, Philo, had identified the Word of God with the Logos of Greek thought. However, there is now conclusive manuscript evidence that Palestinian Jews of the First Century B.C. already used the term, "the Word of God," before the time of Philo and Jesus. So its usage in the Gospel of John does not prove Greek influence upon the author of John, as was believed by earlier generations of scholars.

NOTES

1. See The Gnostic Gospels, by Elaine Pagels; New York, Random House, 1979.
2. See the two-volume edition of the Pseudepigrapha, edited by James H. Charlesworth and published by Doubleday in 1983 and 1985, for definitive information.
3. Matthew's original Sayings Source (Q-1) has the kingdom of God as a basic theme, and agrees more closely with modern New Thought than the revision (Q-2). For information on this and related issues, read Chapter 7 of Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity, published in 1986 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Chapter 7 is entitled, "On Bridging the Gulf from Q to the Gospel of Thomas (or Vice Versa)," and is written by James M. Robinson.
4. John A. T. Robinson's book, The Priority of John, provides a thorough summary of modern scholarship regarding the Gospel of John. Its American edition was published by Meyer Stone Books in 1987.

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY MENTIONED IN LESSON 2

The Gnostic Gospels - Elaine Pagels
Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity - Edited by Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr.; specif. Ch. 7 by James M. Robinson
The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. I & II - James H. Charlesworth, Editor
The Priority of John - John A. T. Robinson

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Luke 4:16-24:53

QUESTIONS

Summarize the probable sources of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As part of your summary, give answers to the following questions:

- A. Who is thought, according to church tradition, to have made the first written collection of Jesus' sayings?
- B. Which of the Four Gospels was the first to be published?
- C. Which Gospel is the best source for the healing accounts?
- D. Which of the Four Gospels has the best literary quality?
- E. What does the trend of modern scholarship, taken as a whole, have to say about the Gospel of John?