

CHAPTER 21

*THE
NEW TESTAMENT
PENTATEUCH*

THERE ARE FIVE BOOKS in the New Testament which represent the basic teachings of Christ within a historical framework. They are called the four Gospels and the Book of Acts. The first four books account for the period when Christ taught in the flesh (both before and after His resurrection) and the fifth occupies the period from the conclusion of his earthly teaching (Acts 1:4–11) and continues with the progression of that teaching (now directed from heaven) until it reached the city of Rome.

There is a unity of purpose and design within these five historical books. Indeed, the Book of Acts is as much a “Gospel” as the first four, though it is common to designate only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John by the literary term “Gospels.” This is a proper designation because the fifth book is simply a continuation of Luke’s Gospel. It would be perfectly proper to call Luke’s first composition “The First

Gospel of Luke," and the Book of Acts "The Second Gospel of Luke." The internal evidence shows that both are truly "Gospels" in the strict sense of the word. This means there are really five Gospels in the New Testament, not four.

This fact has been recognized by scholars. As mentioned before, Luke's first Gospel deals with the teachings of Christ while he was in the flesh, while the second is the Gospel of the Holy Spirit directed by Christ from heaven. Note the appraisal of Ehrhardt. "The whole purpose of the Book of Acts ... is no less than to be the Gospel of the Holy Spirit"¹ Professor Guthrie also agrees with this conclusion.

Since Luke-Acts must be considered as a whole, and since the first part possesses the character of a Gospel, *the second part must be viewed in the light of this fact.*²

Indeed, Luke himself links the two books together in a literary and structural manner. He said his first work was written to describe what Jesus *began* to do and teach (Acts 1:1) and that he was simply continuing the narrative in his second work.

Professor van Unnick also expressed the view that Acts was a confirmation and continuation of the Gospel message of Luke for those who had no personal acquaintance with Christ while he was in the flesh.³ In simple terms, the Book of Acts must also be acknowledged as a "Gospel" like the first four books of the New Testament canon. This means, again, there are *five* Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, First Luke, John and Second Luke. It is important that these five books be reckoned as a unit, which could be called the Pentateuch of the New Testament.

¹ Arnold Ehrhardt, "The Construction and Purpose of the Acts of the Apostles," *Studia Theologica* 12.1(1958), 55.

² Donald B. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3d ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1970), 350, italics mine.

³ W. C. van Unnick, "The 'Book of Acts' the Confirmation of the Gospel" *Novum Testamentum* 4 (1960), 26-50.

These books were placed in a first rank position within the New Testament canon for a purpose. They were not intended to be biographies of Christ's life. Their main emphasis was to show the progression of the teaching of the Gospel from its beginning in Galilee (Acts 10:37) to Jerusalem, then from Jerusalem (the capital of the Jewish world) to Rome (the capital of the Gentile world). All five books when reckoned together provide people with the historical proof that the Gospel was indeed preached to "all the world" as a fulfillment of Christ's commission to the apostles (Romans 16:26; Colossians 1:23; 1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 4:17). With this as one of the bases for their inclusion in the canon, it can be seen that the 22 books following the "New Testament Pentateuch" present the rest of the doctrinal teachings which make the Christian message complete and universal. That message was designed to reach out and embrace *all nations of the world*, not just the Jews. Thus, this Christian Pentateuch was written and placed in first position within the New Testament canon to represent the Christian "Torah" (the central "Law") of the whole Bible.

Why a New Testament Pentateuch?

The Jews of the 1st century acknowledged the profound authority of the Law of Moses above all other writings. There was nothing that could remotely compare with that Law in matters of importance or prestige. That Law was found in the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

When it came time to canonize the New Testament, it must have occurred to the apostles that the New Testament "Law" would most naturally be composed of five books. There would have been nothing odd about this because many parts of the Old Testament were constructed around the symbolic number five. It was the number of "Law." For example, the 150 psalms which made up the Book of Psalms were arranged by the Old Testament canonizers into

five divisions, and they paralleled the five books of the Law. 4 Even the basic law itself, the Ten Commandments, was reckoned in the Jewish manner as being five laws relating to God (the first five, including the fifth dealing with parents) and the remaining five having to do with human affairs.

The number *five* in relation to Law is found in another way. It should be remembered that the Old Testament laws were symbolically required to be inscribed on the hand and in the forehead (Exodus 19:9,16). The "head" represented the intellect (with its *five* senses) and the hand symbolized work (with its *five* digits) that indicated the performance of the Law in an active and physical way.

The number "five" was also associated with Old Testament canonization in another way. The Festival Scroll (known as the *Megillot*) was made up of five books (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther) ordained to be read at the five Jewish festivals (Passover, Pentecost, the eve of the 10th of Ab, Tabernacles, Purim). As a further significance to the number, the middle book of the Megillot (Lamentations) was also divided into five distinct sections. In the New Testament itself, scholars have found that the Gospel of Matthew has a fivefold arrangement.

It has been suggested that Matthew's fivefold scheme was patterned on the fivefold character of the books of the Law, the idea being that the author was attempting to provide a 'Pentateuch,' as the new law for the community of the new Israel, that is, the Christian Church.⁴

Whatever the case, the fivefold symbolic characteristic associated with matters of Old Testament Law is well known by biblical scholars, and the apostles could not have been unaware of its unique numerical significance. And with the "historical" books of the New Testament (that is,

⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 31.

the Gospels and the Book of Acts) being five in number, and that they provide a logical and consecutive narration on the progress of Christian teaching from Nazareth, to Jerusalem, and then to Rome, the arrangement of these books into a fivefold unit by the canonizers must be reckoned as not a matter of chance. There was a deliberate design intended by using this procedure.

Why the Gospel Arrangement?

While the orthodox Christians recognized the first four Gospels as canonical, there were some of the 3rd and 4th centuries who proposed a change in the manuscript order. Because John and Matthew were original apostles of Christ (while Mark and Luke were not), a minority were prone to place the Gospel of John right after Matthew because of apostolic rank. This was, however, only an academic suggestion which found no permanent approval. There was no reason for such a change because it can be shown that Mark and Luke were simply the secretaries for two apostles: Peter and Paul. It was common in the 1st century for men of authority to have amanuenses (official secretaries) to write their letters or books for them. Paul used such people on many occasions. His writing of the Book of Romans is an example. "I Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord" (Romans 16:22). Most, if not all, of Paul's epistles were actually written by amanuenses whom he maintained on his staff of transcribers. Since Luke was a companion of Paul, it is perfectly proper to assume that Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts were actually the historical record which Paul called "my Gospel" in 2 Timothy 2:8.

As for the Gospel of Mark, it has long been known that John Mark was recognized as the secretary, or amanuensis, of the apostle Peter. Indeed, in the Gospel of Mark the great humility of Peter is conspicuous in all parts of it. Where anything is related which might show Peter's weakness, we find it recorded in detail whereas the other Gospels often

show Peter's strengths. In Mark there is scarcely an action by Christ in which Peter is not mentioned as being a close observer or communicant. All of this affords a reasonable deduction that the writer of the Gospel of Mark was an eye-witness and close observer of the events recorded about Christ's life from the baptism of John to his crucifixion in Jerusalem. The ancient testimony of Papias, in the early 2nd century, that Mark was the secretary of the apostle Peter (and not the actual eyewitness himself) has such good credentials, and the internal evidence of the Gospel itself is so compatible to this view that it seems evident that the Gospel of Mark is really the Gospel of Peter.

The Order of the Four Gospels

The first Gospel in the canonical order is that of Matthew. Why should his Gospel come first in order? Though Matthew was certainly of lesser rank within the Christian authority dispensed by Christ than Peter and John, there is another side of the story. The actual name of Matthew was Levi (Luke 5:27–29). This shows that he was of Levitical descent, and in an Old Testament order of priority this would have accorded him a first position among ordinary Jews. Besides that, it can be easily seen that his Gospel was oriented to Jewish people, not to the Gentile world. His reference to the "kingdom of heaven" rather than the "kingdom of God" is a sure sign of this orientation. In the Jewish world of the 1st century, it was illegal to utter the divine name of Yahweh in public. Only the High Priest was able to say it on the Day of Atonement (or in private when no one would hear the sound of the august name). Matthew abides with this belief by adhering to the precautionary use of "heaven" rather than any personal reference to "God." There is even strong traditional evidence that the Gospel was first written in Hebrew (or Aramaic) which the Jews of Palestine found more suitable to use in their holy writings. Matthew was also the ideal person to bridge the gap from

the Old to the New Testament because the preservation of the earlier revelation had been committed to the priests (Deuteronomy. 31:9) and Matthew was both a Levite and an apostle.

The Gospel of Matthew is a perfectly good account of the life and works of Jesus designed to satisfy the queries of those with strong Jewish persuasions. Indeed, there is reason to believe that its first-rank position among the “five Gospels” is because Matthew may well have written his Gospel at the command of James, the head of the Jerusalem community of believers. It may be that Matthew (Levi) was the amanuensis of James, the brother of Christ. If this is the case, it was important that Matthew be a Levite. To Jews this gave him precedence in rank over Peter (responsible for the Gospel of Mark) who was only a Galilean Jew of ordinary stock. But there is one other point why Matthew’s Gospel must be accorded a position of first rank among the Gospels. The apostle Paul made it abundantly clear that Christ’s teachings were designed to go to the Jewish people *first* (Romans 2:9–10). Paul, when speaking to the Jews in Galatia, said: “It was *necessary* that the Word of God should first have been spoken to you” (Acts 13:46). This principle was consistently followed by Paul and the other apostles in teaching the Gospel to those throughout the world. Paul was keenly aware of this need (which he felt was a requirement). This is just another reason why the “Jewish” Gospel of Matthew had to appear first in the divine library of the New Testament. And, of course, that is exactly where we find it in the manuscripts. But, since it looks like the Gospel of Matthew was really a Gospel that James (the head of the Christians at Jerusalem) would have sanctioned for the Jewish people particularly, the Gospel could well be called “James’s Gospel.” While the Gospel of Mark could well be called “Peter’s Gospel,” and the Gospel of Luke could well be called “Paul’s Gospel.” Now note that when Paul referred to the apostles in Jerusalem in Galatians 2:9, he

mentioned them in accordance to their administrative rank: James, Cephas (Peter) and John. In the first canonization of the Gospels (before John wrote and canonized his own Gospel), the three Gospels would have been those of Matthew (James), Mark (Cephas, or Peter), and Luke (Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles). This is precisely the administrative rank that the various apostles would have had in the early Christian community. This is no doubt another major reason why Matthew, Mark and Luke/Acts were placed in the position they were within the original canonical arrangement, with John's Gospel becoming a type of interloper between Luke and Acts when the final canonization took place under the apostle John at the last part of the 1st century.

Indeed, let us look at the Gospel of John. Why is that Gospel placed after Luke and intervening between the Gospel of Luke and the Book (or Gospel) of Acts? The Gospel of Luke and the Book (or Gospel) of Acts were written by Luke (for Paul) and are clearly two books that should normally be placed in parallel to each other. But the Gospel of John appears in the arrangement of the Gospels as an interloper – positioned right between the two “Gospels” written by Luke. The reason for this is no difficulty. The fact is John was the last to write his Gospel. His work is more of a summing-up of events that the others avoided or did not feel necessary to relate. And even the fact that John's Gospel separates Luke's Gospel from the Book of Acts (as though the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were *pried apart* from one another and John's Gospel placed between them) is a sure sign that the Gospel of John was written last. This helps show that the final canonization of the New Testament was accomplished by the apostle John who arranged the final order of the New Testament books. It will be later demonstrated that John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation were written and put into final form at the close of the 1st century. This late date could help explain why

Restoring the Original Bible

John's Gospel seems to be "wedged" between Luke's Gospel (First Luke) and the Book of Acts (Second Luke).

In summation, let us look once again at the New Testament "Pentateuch." First priority of position is accorded to the Gospel of Matthew who wrote primarily to the Jewish people. He was a Levite whom the Jews would respect as one with Old Testament authority to write the truth of God to Israel. Second comes the Gospel of Mark, which is actually Peter's Gospel. It has both a Jewish and Gentile emphasis. Recall that Peter started out in his Christian experience by preaching only to Jews and other circumcised peoples closely akin to the Jews, but it was he whom Christ directed to go first to the Gentiles. At the end of his life, Peter was finally in Rome (with the apostle Paul) and the Gentile emphasis to his preaching of the Gospel was also recognized. Third comes the Gospel of Luke. It was written by a Gentile (the physician Luke) on behalf of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. This is the reason it is positioned in third rank in the official arrangement of the Gospels. In fact, in the first canonization made by Peter and Paul in Rome somewhere near the end of 66 C.E., it may well be the case that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were positioned in tandem to one another as one would normally expect them to be. But this was not the end of the story. The apostle Peter sent the canonical books that he and Paul had arranged to the apostle John in Ephesus. It was later that John wrote his Gospel. Then John, at that later date, simply moved aside the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts (which normally should be placed directly next to each other) and wedged his Gospel between them. Since it was the last official Gospel written, it was also accorded last place.

There is another reason for this placement. John's Gospel is thoroughly Gentile (or Samaritan) though John was an apostle to the Jews. Though the Jews are often mentioned, descriptions of them are always unflattering (as

though a considerable time had elapsed and the Jews were now considered unpopular). Whereas the Gospel of Matthew is so careful not to offend Jewish sensitivities in matters of religion, the other Gospels progressively become less Jewish in their orientation and the Gospel of John abandons any desire to please a Jewish audience. Nevertheless, it is plain that the principle "to the *Jew first*" is adhered to in the arrangement of the first four Gospels. The theme behind the positioning of the books went from the *thoroughly Jewish* emphasis (Matthew) in a progressive way to the *thoroughly universal* (John).

With John's Gospel added to the other three Gospels, plus Luke's Book of Acts, there became a fivefold canon of books which amounted to a New Testament Pentateuch – just like Moses had given his fivefold Pentateuch in the Old Testament. This allowed 22 Old Testament books to be flanked on one side of the New Testament Pentateuch and the final 22 New Testament books to be flanked on the other side. This made a perfect balance of books on either side. Thus, the fivefold books of the New Testament Pentateuch became the center section – the divine fulcrum for all the books of the Bible. Those five historical books present to mankind a divine account of how the Gospel started from a town in Galilee called Nazareth. How it finally went to Jerusalem. And from Jerusalem, it reached out to the center of the Gentile world to Rome itself. From there, Peter and Paul sent the divine books which they canonized up to that time back to the apostle John in Ephesus where he later added his own works. John continued living some 30 years longer awaiting the final visionary experience he was promised about end-time events (the second and up-to-date account in the Book of Revelation). All of this occurred about 96 C.E., and not long afterward he died a martyr as predicted by Christ (Matthew 20:22–23). But before his death, John finalized the writing, arranging and editing of the New Testament canon and presented it to the

Christian community. It was thus near the end of the 1st century when the canonization was completed. Since that time the world has had the 49 sacred books (7 times 7) which make up the Holy Bible. And the divine focal point of that complete revelation is the New Testament Pentateuch.

There is a most important principle which must constantly be remembered relative to the canonization of the Christian Pentateuch and the other New Testament books (and I do not apologize for repeating it): The Gospel must always go *first* to the Jews and *lastly* to the Gentiles. This factor of preeminence is found in the positioning of the books of the Christian Pentateuch and in all contexts of the New Testament. Everywhere the apostles Peter and Paul taught, they went to the Jewish people first (Acts 11:19, 13:14, 14:1, 17:1, 10, 18:4, 19:8, 28:17). "It was necessary that the Word of God should *first* have been spoken to you" (Acts 13:46). This is why, as we will see in the next chapter, the seven General "Jewish" Epistles (James; 1 & 2 Peter; 1, 2 & 3 John; and Jude) must precede the fourteen of the apostle Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) in the New Testament canon. This is the exact arrangement maintained in the early manuscript order of the New Testament books, and the one that should be followed today.