

# THE PATTERN OF THE SYNOPTISTS

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IT is a long time since last THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY published an article by Mr. Moule—just thirty years. But regular attenders at the Tyndale Fellowship New Testament study groups in July of each year know that he has been the most regular attender of them all, and that his fertile mind is constantly making contributions to their deliberations which do not lie on the beaten track of academic study. It is good to be able to publish a contribution of this order in the QUARTERLY.

THE main purpose of this article is to show that there is a correspondence between the three Synoptic Gospels and the three divisions of the Old Testament—Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa. The correspondence between St. Matthew and the Torah has already been pointed out, but this article maintains that the argument can be carried further to include the whole Synoptic material.

## I. ST. MATTHEW—THE CHRISTIAN TORAH OR LAW

St. Matthew opens his gospel "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ . . ." (Matt. 1: 1). The phrase reminds us of: "This is the book of the generations of Adam . . ." (Gen. 5: 1). The phrase "the book of the generations" is unique in Genesis, and stronger and more comprehensive than simply "This is the generation", a phrase which supplies the framework for the book. It is as if "This is the book of the generations of Adam" were the general title of the work, and the other generations chapter-headings. Similarly St. Matthew, by using the phrase "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ", says in effect: "You can read the book of the generations of Adam, the first man, in Genesis. Here begins the book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the second man." In this case the phrase embraces the whole of the gospel, a view ceded by Plummer (A. Plummer, *St. Matthew*, p. 1 n.).<sup>1</sup> But, whatever view we take, the correspondence between the genealogical structure in St. Matthew and the whole genealogical structure of Genesis is remarkable.

<sup>1</sup> In the LXX of Gen. 2: 4 we have: "This is the book of the generation of the heaven and the earth". In which case we have a series:

- (1) Gen. 2: 4. The book of the generation of the world and mankind.
- (2) Gen. 5: 1. The book of the generation of Adam and his descendants.
- (3) Matt. 1: 1. The book of the generation of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

There are some further broad parallels. In his first two chapters, peculiar to St. Matthew, we have the mention of Joseph and dreams (1: 20; 2: 12, 13, 19); the association with Egypt; and the child Jesus comes up out of Egypt (2: 15). We are reminded of the first Joseph and his dreams, his lordship in Egypt, and how the children of Israel came up out of Egypt. All this corresponds with the latter part of Genesis (37-50) and with the early part of Exodus (1-18).

Having completed his first two chapters of introduction, broadly according to Genesis and Exodus, St. Matthew is now in a position to use his own peculiar material—his record of the words of Christ. As Papias (c. A.D. 60-150) wrote: "So then, Matthew indeed in the Hebrew language put together the λόγια, in writing . . ."

The word λόγια engages our attention, coming four times in Holy Scripture: (1) Acts 7: 38, λόγια ζώντα (lively oracles); (2) Rom. 3: 2, τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ (the oracles of God); (3) Heb. 5: 12, τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ (the first principles of the oracles of God); (4) 1 Pet. 4: 11, ὡς λόγια θεοῦ (as the oracles of God). The first two references are particularly notable. St. Stephen uses the word in reference to the oracles of Moses in the wilderness, St. Paul in a general sense of the O.T. Scriptures. The word λόγια then in Holy Scripture seems essentially to mean "the recorded utterances of God", and to have a semi-technical meaning. Papias in using the word of St. Matthew's records may well be using it in the same way. St. Matthew had to hand his own records of the words of Christ—the living Word.

There is a remarkable verse in the Pentateuch which helps us realize the nature of these lively Mosaic oracles. Num. 7: 89 states: "He heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the Ark of Testimony, from between the two cherubim; and he spake unto him." This apparently is how the whole of the book of Leviticus was delivered.

In Leviticus the phrase "And the Lord spake unto Moses" recurs at the beginning of each of the the main divisions, and 36 times in all. "No other book of the Bible has quite the same peculiarity. Whilst 'all Scripture is given by inspiration of God', yet this portion of it reports more of the exact words of God than any other. It conveys peculiarly God's voice and God's words" (Hubert Brooke, *Studies in Leviticus*, p. 10).

In Leviticus we have the heart of the oracles of God. But when we take the Pentateuch as a whole we realize that large portions of Exodus and parts of Numbers were God's words, or that of His angel, and the whole of Deuteronomy is the word of Moses his prophet. So that the Torah as a whole is in a peculiar way "the

lively oracles of God"—recorded utterances of the living God.

St. Matthew's λόγια of Christ therefore corresponded with the lively oracles of the O.T. Having chiefly in mind the utterances and teaching of Messiah he chose the Pentateuch, in which the recorded utterances of God are so prominent, to give him a pattern and outline for his Gospel. St. Matthew's Gospel is therefore the Christian Torah. It is his pocket Pentateuch.

This is borne out by the bulk of the material in his gospel. "A large portion of Matthew's record is devoted to discourses . . . The words of Messiah occupy about three-fifths of the record, about 644 of its 1068 verses" (W. Graham Scroggie, *The Four Gospels*, p. 291). Again: "What the Evangelist chiefly has at heart is to add to Mark's narratives of the *doings* of the Messiah a representative summary of the *teaching* of the Messiah. The writer had a deep interest in all that Messiah said; and the number of sayings which he has collected shows this still more" (Plummer, *St. Matthew*, p. xix).

After he has concluded his introduction, then, St. Matthew begins using his Markan material, which gives the backbone to his work, and presents the figure of John the Baptist (ch. 3). But he still has in mind the broad sweep and chief landmarks of the Pentateuchal story and very quickly at ch. 5 he arrives at the mountain, from which our Lord gives his extended discourse—chs. 5-7. This mountain quite clearly corresponds with Mt. Sinai and the giving of the law by Moses (Exodus 19-23). The Law is, of course, adapted by Christ, and Matt. 5: 17-48 makes it clear that it is adapted for the kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Possibly the Mount of Transfiguration corresponds with the second ascent of Moses up Mount Sinai. St. Matthew alone records that "his face did shine as the sun" (Matt. 7: 2); cf. "the skin of his face shone" (Exodus 34: 30). Possibly also the discourse on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24) corresponds with Moses' farewell exhortation to Israel concerning the days to come (Deut. 31-33). The Mount of Transfiguration and the Mount of Olives are of course in common with the other Synoptists.

So St. Matthew proceeds through his gospel, spreading out our Lord's discourses—chs. 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 23-25—spreading them out, like clothes, upon the skeleton of St. Mark's facts, at the same time bearing in mind the broad sweep of the Pentateuchal narrative.

The last mountain in his gospel is the Mount of Mission (Matt.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "forty days and forty nights" of the temptation (Matt. 4: 2) is peculiar to St. Matthew. Similarly Elijah travelled "forty days and forty nights" (1 Kings 19: 8) to Horeb, whilst Moses remained in the mount "forty days and forty nights" (Ex. 24: 18).

28: 16-20), the whole of his last chapter being peculiar to St. Matthew. This mountain at the end of the Gospel corresponds exactly with Mount Pisgah (Deut. 34), at the end of the Torah. As Moses died looking out over the Promised Land, so the Risen Lord gives his final commission to his disciples looking out over the whole world, his Land of Promise.

We maintain, therefore, that St. Matthew had in mind the broad outline of the Pentateuch as he composed his gospel. He wrote his own Introduction (chs. 1 and 2) and Conclusion (ch. 28) to correspond with the beginning and ending of the Pentateuch. In between he stretched out his collection of our Lord's sayings upon the framework of St. Mark. St. Matthew's Gospel is therefore the Christian Torah, or Law.

## II. ST. MARK—THE CHRISTIAN PROPHETS

If St. Matthew was the Christian Law, we may perhaps envisage St. Mark as the Christian Prophets. A good many things incline us to think that this may be so.

The divisions of the Hebrew Bible regularly used in the Synagogue worship were The Law and The Prophets—the latter beginning with our historical books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, and concluding with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets.

The Prophets end with Malachi, and St. Mark, alone among the Synoptists, opens with a quotation from the end of Malachi's prophecy: "Behold I send my messenger before thy face which shall prepare thy way before thee" (Mal. 3: 1). The word "prepare" seems also to suggest to him a quotation of the Baptist's own text: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord . . ." (Isa. 40: 3). So the two quotations stand together, both taken from the prophets. Thus St. Mark takes up the N.T. story exactly where the prophets left it off—with the arrival of God's messenger (Mal. 3: 1) and with the figure of John the Baptist, who trod so plainly in the steps of Elijah "which was for to come" (Mal. 4: 5).

In the Synagogue worship, after the Haftarah or reading of the prophets there followed the address or sermon. In the opening part of St. Mark emphasis is laid on the preaching of the Baptist and of Jesus (1: 4, 7, 14), and this was the point at which Jesus would speak to the Synagogue audience. It was at this point also that St. Paul in Acts was invited to address the people.

"The ground covered by Mark appears to be an expansion of the report of Peter's sermon at Caesarea (Acts 10: 34-43), begin-

ning with the baptism of John, and ending with the Ascension (cf. Acts 1: 21, 22) . . . Mark's Gospel is preaching, Luke's is record, John's is teaching, and Matthew combines all three" (W. Graham Scroggie, *The Four Gospels*, pp. 183, 188).

St. Mark's Gospel therefore is the expansion of an address, just such as might have been given in the Synagogue after a reading from the prophets. The introductory section (1: 1-13) might be repeated each time, and a selection then made from one of the incidents in the gospel for exposition and teaching, either inside or outside the Synagogue.

At the beginning of the prophets stands a series of historical books. Here are recorded the words and deeds of the prophets—the events, signs and wonders which followed their utterances. So it is very much in a line with the prophets to give an account of the miracles which Jesus performed. His word was with power and caused astonishment and was the occasion of giving glory to God. St. Mark is chiefly interested in what Jesus *did*—his deeds and mighty wonders.

A passing reference to Elijah and Elisha may be added here. These two prophets take up a large space in the Prophets. The story extends from 1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 13. There are 18 chapters out of 47, or rather more than one-third of the combined books. The story is given in minute detail.

Elijah, we know, corresponds with John the Baptist, and Elisha, presumably, with Messiah. St. Mark does not mention Elisha by name but he may be said to write of Messiah as the contemporary fulfilment of the rôle of Elisha. It is interesting to note that St. Luke records our Lord as referring to just these two, Elijah and Elisha, in his sermon in the synagogue at the outset of his ministry (Luke 4: 26, 27).<sup>3</sup>

Whoever wrote the conclusion to St. Mark's gospel (Mark 16: 9-20) has recaptured the note of preaching found in the first chapter (16: 15, 20; cf. 1: 4, 7, 14, 38, 39). It seems to have been someone who understood the main significance of the gospel-preaching.

We conclude, therefore, that St. Mark represents the Christian Prophets. He presents to us Messiah, mighty in word and deed, in a series of striking incidents suitable for presentation to an audience inside the synagogue or in Christian gatherings, suitable for preaching and teaching—starting from where the prophets break off.

<sup>3</sup> Elijah and Elisha both appeared in the apostate kingdom before its fall in 722 B.C.; the Baptist and the Messiah in Israel a generation before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

### III. ST. LUKE AND ACTS—THE CHRISTIAN HAGIOGRAPHA OR WRITINGS

If St. Matthew is the Christian Torah and St. Mark the Christian Prophets, it seems logical that St. Luke is the Christian Hagiographa. The following observations may be noted.

In N.T. times the book of Psalms was being used in the liturgy of the Temple and Synagogue. The rest of the third division of the Hebrew Bible seems to have been used for private devotion and comment, as a kind of supplement.<sup>4</sup> St. Luke in his first introduction addresses Theophilus, that he might know "the certainty of those things in which he had been instructed." The volume which follows, therefore, looks like a Christian handbook on the gospel story, a book to be read and consulted at home.

St. Luke in writing felt that he could give himself latitude. He mentions a number of different writers who covered the same ground and whom he no doubt consulted ("many have taken in hand to set forth a declaration . . .")—which may explain why such a large proportion of his gospel is peculiar to St. Luke. There are "631 verses in Luke which contain matter which is peculiar to his Gospel . . . In Luke there are 1149 verses (R.V.), so that the matter which is peculiar amounts to half the Gospel plus 56 verses" (W. Graham Scroggie, *Guide to the Gospels*, p. 350).

This may be compared with 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Hagiographa. "The Greek translators called them *Paraleipomena*, i.e. 'things omitted', or supplements; because many things not contained in the preceding histories are here supplied" (*Paragraph Bible* on 1 Chronicles). St. Luke's Gospel is a N.T. *Paraleipomena*.

St. Mark's Gospel begins where the Prophets end, with Malachi. St. Luke's Gospel begins where the Hagiographa end. The Hagiographa end at 2 Chron. 36: 22, 23, with the injunction of Cyrus to rebuild the temple. When the curtain goes up in St. Luke the scene is in the second temple at the time of prayer.

Again, the building of the temple of Solomon and an account of the activities of the priests and of the servants of the temple is a very prominent feature of 1 and 2 Chronicles, which St. Luke takes up in his gospel, and also of course in Acts. The setting of the first two chapters of the gospel is largely the temple, and he leaves the disciples worshipping and praising God in the temple (so also in

<sup>4</sup>"There may well have been, also, possibly on Sabbath afternoons, a cycle from the Hagiographa" (C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office*, 1964, p. 14). Dugmore's possibility has reference probably to a date later than the N.T.

Acts 1-7). In all this treatment of the temple St. Luke is unique.

The Hagiographa begin with the five books of the Psalms. The first two chapters of St. Luke are filled with Christian songs of praise. True, the nativity stories draw also on the stories of Samuel for their pattern, but St. Luke was not bound closely to any particular scheme. He used and adapted different sources within a general framework—the framework here being that of the temple.<sup>5</sup>

An example of his adaptation is our Lord's genealogy from Adam. Here he seems to have used the genealogy from the beginning of 1 Chronicles, reversed it—showing that the Second Man had reversed the course of history—and placed it after the Baptism (Luke 3: 23-38).

Reference has already been made to the incident in the synagogue (Luke 4: 16-30). This seems to come in roughly the same place in St. Luke as the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew. Both are programmatic. St. Matthew was concerned to show that the Christian tradition is all in a line with the Jewish. St. Luke on the other hand wrote for Gentile Christians to show they had their rightful place in synagogue worship but had been ejected by the Jews.<sup>6</sup> The incident of the synagogue stands at the head of a whole series of incidents stretching right down through the Acts.

St. Luke's Conclusion (ch. 24), like St. Matthew's, is peculiar. St. Luke alone among the Synoptists mentions the fulfilment of prophecy in the Psalms, or Writings, as well as in the Law and the Prophets: "all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms concerning me" (Luke 24: 44). He makes a point of recording our Lord's reference to the Hagiographa, which he was using for his outline scheme.

In embarking on the composition of the Acts we need to remember that St. Luke used the LXX and in the LXX the order of the books in the Hebrew Bible was altered. As in our Bibles, 1 and 2 Chronicles were followed by Ezra-Nehemiah, so that we need to consider the series of these four books.

There is an overlap between the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra, the concluding verses being repeated (2 Chronicles

<sup>5</sup> In the passage Luke 19: 28-48 the Evangelist omits the cursing of the fig tree, found in the other two Synoptists. He may be concerned to pass on and place Jesus in the temple, teaching. The fig tree would take him out of his way in his general scheme.

<sup>6</sup> Illustrating from Methodism: one (St. Matthew) wrote for members of the Church of England who had become Methodists, showing their practices as true to Church teaching: the other (St. Luke) for non-churchgoers who had been converted and wondered why they had no place in the church.

36: 22, 23 = Ezra 1: 1, 2, 3a). Similarly there is an overlap between the end of St. Luke and the beginning of Acts, the story of the Ascension being repeated.

The subject of the book of Ezra is the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. It is in this temple, adorned by Herod, that the whole story of Acts 1-7 is set, concluding with the violent difference with Stephen as to its relevance and significance.

Together with Ezra we must take the corresponding minor prophet Haggai,<sup>7</sup> and in this connection we may note a reference which seems to be an echo of Haggai 2: 6-9 in Acts 4: 23ff. The verse quoted in the prayer is Psalm 2: 1-2, but the framework of the passage seems to be suggested by Haggai—the address to the God of heaven and earth and sea (Hag. 2: 6; cf. Acts 4: 24); the shaking of the nations and of the earth (Hag. 2: 7; cf. Acts 4: 31); the silver and the gold is the Lord's (Hag. 2: 8; cf. Acts 4: 34f.).

In this case Haggai, the prophet who spoke about the re-building of the temple, is used as a framework and details filled in. This seems to be characteristic of St. Luke's method—the use of a frame on a large scale as with the Hagiographa as a whole, or on a small scale as in this incident, details being fitted in accordingly.

After Acts 8: 1 the story passes from Jerusalem, but a whole series of cities appear as centres for the propagation of the Gospel—the "city of Samaria", Damascus, Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, Caesarea, and finally Rome. The latter part of the Acts deals with the spread of the gospel in the cities of the Roman Empire—the Christian counterpart of Nehemiah and his work in the consolidation of Jerusalem.

We conclude, therefore, that St. Luke used the Hagiographa for the outlines of his Gospel and Acts, and that his work represents the Christian Psalms and other Writings.

#### IV CONCLUSION: THE SYNOPTISTS AND ST. JOHN

All three Synoptists draw upon St. Matthew's Logia—some more, some less. There seem to have been Oracles of the Word Incarnate, probably in Aramaic, records of words distinct from deeds, and *written down in the days of His flesh*.

St. Mark's Gospel was the substance of St. Peter's teaching, containing especially the deeds of Messiah. It was the kind of preaching

<sup>7</sup> In the LXX and in our Bibles the last three historical books and the last three prophets correspond. Ezra deals with the Temple || Haggai; Nehemiah deals with the City || Zechariah (Jerusalem is mentioned 39 times); Esther with the People || Malachi.

and teaching which would follow the reading of the prophets. It was therefore the Christian counterpart to the Prophets.

St. Matthew made use of St. Mark for the deeds of Messiah. On this skeleton he stretched large portions of teaching, taken from his original Logia. Moreover he supplied an Introduction of the Infancy and his own conclusion of the Resurrection. These followed broadly the story of God's people in Genesis and Exodus and in the last chapter of Deuteronomy. St. Matthew is the Christian Torah.

St. Luke, knowing of the other two, copied St. Matthew and wrote his own account of the Infancy and Resurrection. He used St. Mark for his main body but incorporated a quantity of quite fresh material. As a framework for his two volumes he used the Hagiographa, particularly Psalms, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and Ezra-Neemiah. St. Luke, therefore, is the Christian Chronicler and his work the Christian Hagiographa.

These observations may help us to understand why each evangelist omitted certain material. It did not fit in with the object he had in mind. The correspondence with the great divisions of the Hebrew Bible seems to indicate that the three Synoptists spring from very early association of Christian worship, preaching, and instruction with the Synagogue.

The Synoptists spring originally from the words of Christ taken down in the days of His flesh. St. John's Gospel springs from records *written down after Pentecost*—probably in Aramaic. We may picture St. John's Gospel growing as follows:

"He shall teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14: 26). The initial inspiration of the Holy Spirit immediately after Pentecost must have been exceptionally potent. The disciples must have remembered very clearly and distinctly what the Lord said to them at the end, the very tone of His voice. St. John may well have written down his own record of these last words. The Lord's sayings in chs. 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 make up five chapters out of 21, about one-quarter of the whole, and form the groundwork of the material of the Gospel.

The incidents in ch. 5 and chs. 7-12 are associated with Jerusalem, and largely with individuals whom St. John would meet in the earliest days of the church, and from whom he could reconstruct the Lord's words. The story of Nicodemus (ch. 3) may have come from his own lips, and ch. 4 may have been recaptured when he visited Samaria (Acts 8: 14ff.).

When towards the end of life St. John put his material together he seems to have used a somewhat similar method to the Synoptists.

He begins with the Torah (Gen. 1), writing his own interpretation, and proceeds to the Baptist and the prophets, ending his first chapter with personal reminiscence. His second chapter reflects the story of the first marriage (Gen. 2) and proceeds to the theme of the Temple as in the Hagiographa. Chapter 3 is again personal reminiscence, and chapter 4 deals with the Samaritans. (John 4: 5-4 concludes this section.)

St. John's Gospel, therefore, is the story viewed from the post-Pentecostal situation. After the illapse of the Spirit he recalls the words of Jesus, and on these words he bases his Gospel—in the case particularly of chapters 13-17 the *ipsissima verba* of the Christ. When he recaptures incidents he views them from the point of view of the Spirit's coming—the new wine is the new wine of the Spirit (ch. 2); Nicodemus's conversation deals with the new birth (ch. 3); they who worship must worship in Spirit and in truth (ch. 4); "This spake he of the Spirit . . ." (7: 39); "When Jesus was glorified then remembered they that these things were written of him" (12: 16.).

Generally speaking, therefore, in all four Gospels the words of Christ were first recorded, and then His deeds and signs were added, the two being worked together.

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