

METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

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CHAPTER FIVE

NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

IF a knowledge of the Old Testament books is important, much more is it necessary to master thoroughly those of the New. We have already taken a "bird's-eye view" of the New Testament. We must now consider some of the books in detail, giving a few analysis as specimens of what can be done with all the books.

MATTHEW

The first of four Gospels, each with its own character and purpose.

- Four Gospels and one CHRIST;
- Four pictures of the one Lord.

In each Gospel ask two questions:

- Can I discover its purpose?
- Can I detect the Plan on which the purpose is carried out?

Consider Matthew's purpose as revealed in chapter 1.

In verse 1 we have three names in close association: JESUS, David, Abraham. At once the keynote is struck. It is a book connecting JESUS with the Jews.

As we read on we come to verse 22, where "**that it might be fulfilled**" gives another hint. It is a book connecting JESUS with the Old Testament. This phrase and the parallel expression "**as it is written**" (2:5) are to be found frequently in Matthew, and should be carefully noted.

The purpose, then, is to present JESUS as the Messiah, the Saviour of the Jews, the fulfillment of the Old Testament. But how is this purpose fulfilled?

Is there any plan in the book? There are most assured marks of a careful structure. Look at 4:17, "**From that time,**" and 16:21, "**from that time**" (same phrase in the Greek). These two expressions mark off the Gospel into its parts.

Up to 4:17 all is introductory; then in 4:17 we have the record of the earlier ministry. Note carefully that in this section (4:17-16:20) we have no reference whatever to the Death; only our Lord's general instruction and miracles. But in 16:21 a new phase occurs. From that time JESUS began to reveal His approaching death. Thence, forward the miracles are fewer, and the revelation of the Passion more prominent.

So we have our main analysis of the Gospel:

1. Introduction, leading to Ministry. 1:1-4:16.
2. Earlier Ministry. 4:17-16:20.
3. Later Ministry. 16:21-26:2.
4. Death and Resurrection. 26:3-28:20.

This is the general plan. But as we look closer we are struck with a phrase in almost identical form five times in the Gospel. See 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1. These are each at the conclusion of a section of teaching, and we can at once see that Matthew's Gospel makes a prominent feature of our Lord's teaching.

If the five great sections are studied it will be observed that they represent a five-fold aspect and order of teaching full of deepest interest, a five-fold proclamation of the king. This should be studied carefully. It is a special feature of the first Gospel.

Then as we continue to read we can see how the miracles are also occasionally grouped, as in chapter 8, though it is the words, not the works, of JESUS which are emphasized by Matthew.

Once more we read this Gospel, and note the recurring phrase, "**the kingdom of heaven,**" found at least thirty-seven times, and not once in Mark and Luke, where it is the "**Kingdom of God.**"

Here is another hint of the plan and purpose of the Gospel - the intention of our Lord to found a kingdom.

Thus we are impressed throughout with the greatness and glory of the Messianic King in His words and works, until at last the Gospel ends with the claim to "**all authority** (power)" and the assurance of His perpetual presence.

MARK

Again we ask about the purpose, and we see it suggested in the opening chapter and verses.

No genealogy is given, and no record of the infancy, but an abrupt introduction to the active life and work of the Son of GOD

And as we read on this impression is deepened. Very little of the teaching of our Lord, but very much of His active service is recorded. But even so the general plan of the Gospel as marked by its subject-matter is much the same as that of Matthew.

1. Introduction to the Ministry. 1:1-14.
2. Earlier Ministry. 1:15-9:50.
3. Later Ministry. 10:1-13:37.
4. Death and Resurrection. 14:1-16:20.

In the light of the emphasis placed on our Lord's activity, we should note the frequency of the words with the meaning of "immediately." Then, as the secret of this activity, note that no Gospel gives such prominence to our Lord's seasons of retirement as this Gospel of work. See 1:35, and collect the others. Dr. Maclear in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools* is helpful on this Gospel, though the Gospel itself should be studied first and foremost.

LUKE

When we turn to the third Gospel we are met with a preface stating the general purpose of the author, but we do not at once gather his point of view.

The first chapter, however, breathes a very human and sympathetic spirit. We feel we are in the midst of some simple yet beautiful lives, and we have glimpses of hearts and homes full of "sweetness and light." So is it with chapter 2, and as we read on into chapter 3, we seem to get a clue in the difference in the genealogy from that in Matthew. There it stopped at Abraham. Here it extends to Adam. This is our clue.

The third Gospel is the Gospel of our Lord's tender, sympathetic, large-hearted humanity, depicting Him as Son of Man rather than Son of David; and, as we now read through with this key we find illustration after illustration of this spirit in the choice of the materials. Some of the parables and much of the teaching prove it. Luke's is the Gospel of love and grace for the outcast, the sufferer, the Samaritan, the prodigal. Read it carefully and watch this point closely all through.

The matter is arranged in the same general way as the former Gospels:

1. Introduction to the Ministry. Chapters 1-3.
2. Early Ministry. 4:1-9:50.
3. Later Ministry. 9:51-19:48.
4. Death and Resurrection. 20:1-24:53.

These three are called the "Synoptic Gospels," because they give a synopsis, or an almost identical outline of our Lord's ministry. They are built upon the same general plan, which is evident even in spite of the peculiar characteristics of each Gospel.

We are at present concerned with the mastery of each Gospel separately. Later on we shall be able to consider their mutual relations.

JOHN

The fourth Gospel completes the fourfold picture of our Lord.

The purpose of this Gospel is definitely stated in 20:31. This verse should be carefully studied. The Gospel has a purpose ("**written in order that**"), and this a twofold one: to lead to belief in the historical JESUS as the Messiah and Son of GOD, and to lead, through belief, to the possession of life.

Consider the seven terms of this verse:

- Believe;
- JESUS;
- CHRIST;
- Son of GOD;
- have;
- life;
- in His name.

On these the whole Gospel is built up. They form its very substance.

But has the Gospel a Plan? Assuredly it has, for its purpose is expressed by means of it. The plan is the presentation of CHRIST in those aspects which elicited faith. The materials selected clearly reveal this.

Yet side by side there is the obvious fact that all did not receive Him, and so the Gospel reveals a growing unbelief, culminating in rejection and crucifixion. This unbelief is accounted for by the deep-seated sinfulness of man and his consequent alienation from GOD.

Thus these three elements run through the Gospel:

- Revelation,
- Reception,
- Rejection.

They are found in the prologue; they are the warp and woof of every chapter.

With this twofold key of belief and unbelief, we may now consider the outline of the plan, and observe how closely the purpose is adhered to throughout. There are few more perfect literary structures than the Fourth Gospel.

(a) Prologue, 1:1-18.

Verses 1-4, Revelation;
Verses 5-11, Rejection;

Verses 12-18, Reception.

- (b) Revelation of the Messiah, 1:19-6:71. The beginnings of Faith and Unbelief.
- (c) Conflict, and development of Unbelief into active Hostility side by side with the Growth of Faith, 7-12.
- (d) Development of Faith, 13-17.
- (e) Culmination of Unbelief, 18, 19.
- (f) Victory of Faith, 20.
- (g) Epilogue, 21.

Thus, on the foundation of the Manifestation of JESUS CHRIST, are raised the two decisive moral factors of Faith and Unbelief.

It is worthwhile to note how the Prologue contains a summary of the whole Gospel:

- (1) Chap. 1:1-4, Revelation = chap. 1:19-chap. 6.
- (2) Chap. 1:5-11, Rejection= chap. 7-chap. 12.
- (3) Chap. 1:12-18, Reception= chap. 13.-chap. 21.

A very significant hint of this great contrast of Faith and Unfaith is given in the phrase "**His own**," which in 1:11 refers to unbelief, and in 13:1 refers to belief. These are practically the two great sections of the Gospel.

We may also note in the above plan a sevenfold structure, and see how the first division answers to the seventh, the second to the sixth, and the third to the fifth, leaving the central one (chapters 13-17) as the kernel or dominant feature of the whole purpose - the growth of faith.

From this outline it is possible and very necessary to descend to detailed study, and the more minute the consideration the more clearly will the glories of this Gospel reveal themselves. Everything will be found in some way to subserve the purpose and to form part of the plan. By this means a thorough knowledge of the contents of the Gospel will be obtained, and also a knowledge of its thought in order and sequence. This will be much more advantageous than a mere recollection of the chapters as they occur in our Authorized Version, by giving them titles to aid the memory as a "rule of thumb." Such an aid may be useful, and anyone who wishes to do this may think of a mountain-peak with two pathways up and down, one on either side. Then, taking the central chapter (chapter 11) as the peak (the greatest miracle), it is possible to think our way backwards through the first ten, and onwards through the last ten, and so grasp the contents. But far better is it to grasp the order of thought and the sequence of the contents, and so truly to think our way through John's wonderful account of his and our Master.

We have dealt more fully with this Gospel because of its great importance, but we are anxious not to supersede but only to stimulate thought, and so we urge all to master this Gospel for themselves. We might purchase a penny edition, keep it in the pocket for constant use, and then read and read and read until we see the purpose glowing in every section, and the plan gradually and beautifully leading up to its culmination in that greatest confession of faith, "**My Lord and my God.**"

THE ACTS

For Christian workers in particular this book is of the greatest value, and should have our most careful and thorough study. It stands midway between the Gospels and Epistles and is the link of connection between them. It is at once the necessary explanation of the Gospels and the required presupposition of the Epistles.

Its connection with the Gospels is close and important, especially with that of Luke. This may be seen from the two accounts of the "Great Forty Days" in Luke 24 and Acts 1, the former written from the standpoint of the close of the earthly life and the latter from that of the commencement of the heavenly life of our Lord.

What, then, is the purpose of Acts?

Study carefully 1:1 and 2. The "**former treatise**" is a record of what JESUS began to do and teach before His Ascension. The present book is a record of what He continued to do and teach after His Ascension. So the book is really a record of "the Acts of the Ascended Lord." He is the real Worker (1:24; 2:33; 3:16; 4:10); and the Holy Spirit the real Power (1:2, and seventy other passages).

Then notice the work described: "**doing and teaching.**" It is a book of deeds and words, action and instruction. Mark the order, and see, Luke 24. 19 and Acts 7. 22. Consider, too, the emphasis on the word "**began.**"

This book is also a record of "**beginnings,**" the commencements of the Church at particular places, and the first specimens of various methods of Christian work. This is the purpose, and the book should be studied with this ever in view if it is to be thoroughly and accurately made our own.

But has the book a Plan also? Is it possible to trace how the purpose is carried out?

Look at chapter 1:8, and note three great facts:

(1) The purpose is to be realized through a special class of people ("**ye . . . witnesses**").

(2) And through a special pathway of progress (note the three extending circles - **Jerusalem, Samaria, uttermost part**). This is not only geographical but also spiritual.

- Jerusalem stands for a people holding the true religion falsely or imperfectly.
- Samaria represents a mixture of true and false.
- "**Uttermost**" indicates false religions or none at all.

(3) This purpose is to be realized by a special equipment of power ("**Holy Spirit**").

The whole book is built up on these three lines.

Now let us analyze the book, and for variety we will look at it from more than one standpoint.

We can consider it-

1. According to historical extension (outwardly):

- (a) Church of Jerusalem. 1:1-7:60.
- (b) Church of Palestine. 8:1-12:25.
- (c) Church of the Gentiles. xiii. 1-28:31.

2. According to spiritual expansion (inwardly):

- (a) Definite commencement. 1:1-8:3.
- (b) Deepening experiences. 8:4-12:25.
- (c) Astonishing progress. 13:1-21:16.
- (d) Apparent check. 21:17-28:31.

3. According to personal effort. (The two men around whom the history mainly turns):

- (a) Peter, 1-12. In five sections (find them), closing with imprisonment and release.
- (b) Paul, 13-28. In five sections (note these), closing with imprisonment (and release?).

Again we urge on all a thorough study of these two books, viz. John and Acts.

It is for this that we have dwelt more fully on them. They will minister to mind and heart a full abundance of light and grace :and power, enriching and equipping us for the service of GOD.

We now complete our consideration of the study of the New Testament by books, by giving some suggestions for the study of the Epistles. This section of the New Testament especially lends itself to the method we are now considering, for the Epistles for the most part have a definite purpose and are fairly easily analyzed.

ROMANS

The first Epistle in the order of our Authorized Version, and in some respects the greatest of them.

The key to its meaning is found in 1:17. The Gospel is declared to be GOD's power of salvation (verse 16), because in it is revealed "**God's Righteousness**" (verse 17).

The theme of the Epistle is "**The Righteousness of God,**" and the whole of it is built up on this one idea. Let it be read through at a sitting if possible, with this thought in mind. Then it should be read again, and even a third time, noting carefully the general impression it makes.

Then consider the following analysis. Find out whether it is correct. Improve, modify, alter it where necessary.

Personal introduction. 1. 1-15.

1. Righteousness required by GOD because of sin. 1:16-3:20.
2. Righteousness provided by GOD in CHRIST. 3:21-26.
3. Righteousness received through faith. 3:27-30.
4. Righteousness anticipated and illustrated in the Old Testament. 4:1-25.
5. Righteousness realized in personal experience. 5-8.
6. Righteousness rejected by the self-righteous Jews. 9-11.
7. Righteousness manifested in daily living. 12:1-15:13.

Personal conclusion. 15:13-16:27.

It will thus be seen that almost every aspect of Righteousness is discussed and illustrated in the Epistle.

Let us ever note that "**God's Righteousness**" includes two elements:

- His Personal Righteousness, that is, the Righteousness of His character revealed in CHRIST;
- His Bestowed Righteousness, that is, the Righteousness of His grace imparted in CHRIST.

We see this in the great passage of 3:26: "**That he might be just (Personal) and the justifier (Bestowed).**"

Different passages emphasize the one or the other according to the context. Every Christian should make a point of understanding as thoroughly as possible the Epistle to the Romans. It is an education for mind, heart, conscience and soul.

GALATIANS

Bishop Lightfoot calls Galatians the sketch of which Romans is the finished picture. The simplest division is one into three parts of two chapters each:

1. Personal 1 and 2.
2. Doctrinal 3 and 4.
3. Practical 5 and 6.

Few Epistles are more intense in feeling and expression.

It came from the very heart of a faithful shepherd, who feared the loss of his flock, the flock endeared to him as that gathered on his first missionary journey (Acts 13 and 14).

EPHESIANS

One of the mountain-peaks of Revelation, disclosing the ultimate and crowning purposes of GOD in CHRIST and in the Church age.

As usual with Paul, the great division is Doctrinal (1-3) and Practical (4-6), the latter following as the necessary and inevitable consequence of the former. The highest doctrine is the motive power of the lowest duty. The keynote is in 1:3, and the entire Epistle illustrates and elaborates this verse.

I THESSALONIANS

Here we have one of the simplest (and probably the earliest) of Paul's writings. It consists of two parts:

- (1) Personal: ending with prayer, 1-3.
- (2) Practical: ending with prayer, 4-5.

HEBREWS

Another of the great Epistles, and at once a letter and a treatise. Consider its theme in 1. 1-4, GOD's complete and final Revelation in the Divine Person and Priestly Work of His Son:

1. The glory of the Person. 1:4-4:13.
2. The glory of the Priesthood. 4:14-10:18.
3. Personal appropriation and practical application. 10:19-12:29.

Each of these sections is divided and subdivided in the course of the discussion. A good detailed plan can be seen in Murray's *Holiest of All*. But first and foremost we should make the general outline of the Epistle our own.

The Epistle treats its theme in the light of the Old Testament, and shows the superiority of our Lord to the men and the ritual of the Old Covenant. The Word "**better**" is a key-word, and is found some eleven times, while the idea is found in every chapter.

I PETER

Instead of an analysis, a key-word is sometimes helpful. It is so here, and the word is "**suffer**."

The Epistle is written to encourage suffering believers, and they are incited to endurance by the thought of the sufferings of CHRIST and the glory to follow.

I JOHN

This is one of the Epistles which it is difficult to analyze, though there is a distinct unity of thought running through it.

The purpose is threefold - 1:4, 2:1, and 5:13; and these threads form the very texture of the Epistle. The last passage (5:13) links it to the Gospel as its sequel (20:31). It is intended that those who have life by believing (Gospel) should know it (Epistle), and keep on believing.

This assurance has three tests:

- Obedience, (1:5-2:6).
- Love of the brethren, (2:7-3:24).
- The possession of the Spirit. (3:24-5:12).

These examples of New Testament books will suffice to illustrate the necessity and value of this mode of study. We have avoided giving too many details, because this would defeat our object, which is to stimulate first-hand study; all the helps in the world will not make up for this, and may probably hinder it.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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