

A Lesson for Today:

In this article, we muse on what can be known about the part early Christian literature played in the development of Christianity as a new world religion. We will look too at new evidence that will help us understand how this literature functioned and at what was demanded of its writers and first readers. We may learn a lesson for today.

The Role of Early Christian Literature:

At the outset, we may acknowledge that the first transmissions of Christian belief and thought were oral, not written. The message of the faith was first preached. It was given verbally in answers to questions. It was debated. It was passed on, therefore, from the mouth of one to the ears of others. In the early Christian era, such an oral/aural method of communication was the common experience of all. Very few people will ever have received a letter, let alone a circular. Only a very few will have had access to an education based on writing and reading. Written communication was limited to the educated. It was limited, therefore, to the privileged.

The period of oral transmission that both accompanied and followed the life and mission of Jesus Christ was an immensely fertile one. As people came to terms with what they believed was a new revelatory work of God through the life of one person, stories got told about him, teachings which could be associated with him were recalled (and imagined?), and all kinds of ideas about him and about what he had done for humankind were entertained. This oral period of Christianity is characterised as fervently charismatic and enthusiastically evangelistic. The belief was that the Holy Spirit was at work.

Oral transmission continues today. But it can be said that, from the moment the church resorted to writing, Christianity embarked on a new and highly significant phase in its development as a new religion. This period was no less fertile than the earlier, oral-only period and stretched, in terms of the writings of the New Testament at least, from the beginning of the second half of the first century to the end of the first half of the second.

Given that the first writings appear to have been in the form of letters written by Paul in the 50's, we may judge that it was the spread of Christianity itself that led to their production. Paul resorted to writing to reach his dispersed congregations more frequently than he might otherwise have done if he had only visited them. And he needed to write, to make contact with them, of course, when he was in prison. Especially, however, the growing church needed written material to guide it in matters to do with its faith and its life. Paul understood this need and met it. (Others, later, added to his work: using his name, it seems, they wrote to guide the church in its organisation of itself.)

A second phase in the church's first writing period, appears to have begun with Mark in the 70's. Traditionally, this gospel writing period is believed to have reined in what had been much based on 'eye-witness' and, supremely, on apostolic witness: it is commonly argued that as the first eyewitnesses and apostles were dying out, a written and lasting witness was needed. Another requirement of the church was of evangelistic material: the church had a mission to fulfil. It also needed its own New Covenant Literature as it came to terms with its separation from Judaism. Writings were needed which could be copied, dispersed, collected and read in all the various centres of developing Christendom.

World events had their influence on what was written. Indeed, the second phase was likely prompted by one, supremely important event. For instance, nowhere in Paul's writings (of the first phase) do we read anything to do with the Fall of Jerusalem and the Destruction of its Temple. It is

in the Synoptic Gospels only that we read interpretations of these cataclysmic events of 70AD. Initially, the church's assumption was that Judaism was finished and would disappear altogether. With the Gospel of John, however, we see how the church had to come to terms with a Judaism that was not finished, had not disappeared, but was surviving in a modified form. At the same time, and later than this too, we can see how the church had to cope with the fact of its own continuing existence. Explanation was needed for the unfulfilled return of Christ and the delay of the end of all things. The earliest literature had promised an early return and judgement of all humanity. In the writings of Luke, in this second phase, we find him writing about the age of the Church. He thus filled the gap in the church's understanding of the divine plan.

(The embarrassing question, however, did not go away. An answer was needed. In the fourth and final phase of writing, as I describe it, it was penned. The 'Second Letter of Peter', written in about 145AD, provided the acceptable reason for the delay in Christ's return.)

Additionally, at this point we may say with good reason that each writing of the early Christian era benefited from the writings that preceded it. Indeed, in the first, Pauline, period of writing, we can see how Paul's own understanding developed with each letter that he wrote. He was inspired, we might say, as much by pathways of thought that he continued to tread through a succession of letters as by the responses he received from the churches to which he had written earlier. A further, obvious point needs to be made. Paul's writings benefited more than anything else from the earlier writings that he knew so well, the writings of the religion in which he was instructed from childhood. Principally, Paul's work was that of making sense of the 'revelation' that was given him (Gal.1.11,12) in the light of the writings of the Old Covenant.

Though tradition associates Mark's Gospel with the reminiscences of Peter, given the argument above for 'writing dependency' its association with Paul seems much more plausible. Paul's Letter to the Romans, 'Paul's Gospel' (tradition: Ro.16.25), is representative of but a step only away from Mark's Gospel. It tells of the eternal worth of belief in Jesus Christ, but very little about him and about what he taught. Mark's Gospel, however, tells of the 'beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ' (Mk. 1.1) and as such it gives us a story, or a set of stories, about the man and his teaching and healing mission, his death and resurrection, *as well as* the eternal worth of belief in him. Until Mark had written what he did, the church possessed no written down account at all of the life of Jesus. It only had Paul's writings and in them a few scattered details about Jesus' descent from David, his being declared Son of God at the time of his resurrection, about the last supper, a betrayal, a cross, Jesus' death ('for our sins, *according to the scriptures*'), his resurrection three days later ('*according to the scriptures*'), the witnesses to the resurrection and a reference to a possible ascension (according to the scripture, Ps. 68.18, which Paul deliberately misquotes).

The question becomes: Could Mark have gathered up, in the first instance, all the possible 'facts' that he could from Paul's writings and so begin his development of his presentation with these? The answer, of course, is, Yes, he could have. If this is what he did actually do, we would have to credit Mark with much more than he is usually credited! Someone, for instance, added 'day' and 'date' references to what Paul had established *according to the scriptures* about the death and resurrection of Jesus. It could well have been Mark himself (or more accurately: the one who wrote Mark's Gospel).

Of the very greatest significance in Mark's writing is his presentation of Days that for him began at the beginning of the twelve hours of daylight and ended after the four watches of the night. In telling about the Day of Jesus' crucifixion, Mark gives the timings of the significant moments as three o'clock, six o'clock and nine o'clock, thus symmetrically dividing up the twelve-hour daylight period. In his telling of his last Day of his narrative, he begins the Day's account of the announcement of Jesus' resurrection with an introduction which is unique in all the gospel: 'And very early on the first day of the week... as the sun rose...' Mark, therefore, gives his last report the fullest significance. The event at *the dawn of the first day of the new week after Passover* marked the 'beginning (of the announcing) of the good news of Jesus Christ (risen from the dead).'

My analysis of Mark's Gospel (structured as Four Series of Seven Days) demonstrates, to my satisfaction at least, that Mark's over-riding purpose was to show how Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Old Covenant (in the first three days' telling of each seven day series) and

how he, Jesus, established the New (in the final three days' telling of each seven day series). The Old Covenant was finished: the events of 70AD demonstrated that to Mark. And these events, in fact, gave him his reason for writing. In the midst of *Bad News* he had *Good News* to tell everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike. The conclusion I reach is that Mark was in total control of what he was writing. Tradition, oral or otherwise, did not control him! I judge it very likely therefore, that Mark began his work by sifting the works of his predecessor, Paul.

Mark's Gospel, then, attempted the first 'description' of the beginnings of Christianity. It presented details (or what purported to be details) about Jesus' life, teaching, mission, death and resurrection. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, in turn, attempted 'developments' of the same. The Acts of the Apostles, written in parallel to Luke's Gospel according to my analysis, presented a 'description' of the beginnings of the church and its growth in the Mediterranean world. Like the Gospels before it, the Acts combines soteriological and historiographical interests.

How then are we to view the purposings of Matthew and Luke? My analyses of their Gospels lend weight to the age-old interpretation that Matthew wrote for the Jews and that Luke wrote for Gentiles. I can see, therefore, no really good reason at all why we should date Matthew's work in the eighties and Luke's work in the nineties, as many scholars do. The productions of these two books could very quickly have followed that of Mark's Gospel. The primary dependency of Matthew and Luke on Mark is hardly disputed today. Their similar dependency on another source 'Q' is, however, increasingly challenged. To be rid of 'Q' we have only to make sense of Luke's use of Matthew. That is what Farrer said in the 1950's. My analysis of Luke's Gospel, I think, provides the necessary evidence. Further, my analyses of both Matthew and Luke show that these two Gospels are structured in the same way. I deduce: Luke both knew and repeated Matthew's book-structure; his work exhibits dependency on both Mark and Matthew.

The writing of the Acts of the Apostles clearly belongs to this period too, though it is slightly later than Luke's Gospel. Signs of disjunction between Luke's ending of his Gospel and his beginning of the Acts - in the accounts of the dating of the ascension - suggest to me that Luke completed his first work before he ever thought about writing his second. When he did start writing again (encouraged by Theophilus?) he introduced changes in this ascension account. His immediate endeavour was to portray Jesus and his disciples against the backdrop of the Jewish Feast of Weeks, culminating in Pentecost. But essentially, before he began writing anything he decided to create his second book as a parallel work to his first. (The two books are sectionally structured in the same way, both numerically and thematically, and details correspond section for section.) What was Luke thinking? He was (surely?) intending to express the following: that just as Jesus had been brought to birth by the Spirit of God, had been called by God and had been empowered by the Spirit and sustained in a life of mission through every kind of trial, so also the church was similarly brought to birth, called and empowered. The church itself, in its life of mission, would be sustained through every kind of trial, just as its Lord had been.

All these first four books of this writing period, then, represent something that is much more than just history. Each book has a specific overall purpose. Each book shows dependency, in some way, on those that were written before it. And yet, each book demonstrates a writer's freedom to re-write the details of 'events' and 'teachings', their sequence, *and* their meaning. May we not say, therefore, that the writers' purposes were not primarily historiographical, but theological, Christological, soteriological and evangelistic?

Lastly, in terms of this second writing phase of the church, we may include John's Gospel. It need not have been written much later than Luke's Gospel. Its dependency on Luke and the earlier Gospels for some of its stories and details seems assured, particularly, in its presentation of a comparison between Jesus and John the Baptist at its opening, but also in its presentations of the clearing of the Temple, the feeding of the Five Thousand, the entry into Jerusalem and much of the Passion narrative.

For an example of detail for which we can plot straight line developments from Paul, through Mark, through Matthew, through Luke to John, I think immediately of Jesus' betrayal and his betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

Clearly, there are significant differences too between John and the Synoptics. Although we note similarities with Mark (for his use of 'sevens', his *Seven Day Series*) and Matthew (for his use of 'fourteens' in 'seven-seven' arrangements of parts, in all but his balancing Sections 2 and 2') and John for his 'seven book sections', we note this writer's greater presentational interest in 'sevens'. In his Gospel he has also seven feasts, seven signs and seven longer 'I am' sayings. John's Gospel also evidences a quantum leap in its Christology. Further, we can observe that it tells 'historical facts' differently. The book presents an overlap between the on-going work of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' ministry (in contradiction to the earlier Gospels). It dates the clearing of the temple early in Jesus' ministry. It shows Jesus visiting Jerusalem several times (in contrast to the others). And it gives a different date for the Day of Jesus' Crucifixion. It is very tempting, of course, to view such differences as these as deliberate corrections of 'historical fact'. Rather, again, as with the earlier gospels, the differences are to do with the differences of the literary and theological purposes of the writers.

An interesting tradition (found in the Muratorian Canon) attaches to John's Gospel. But unlike the tradition that lends *historical veracity though Peter* to Mark's Gospel, this tradition affirms, through John and others, a *Spirit-inspired veracity*. The book does look like it represents another imaginative stage in gospel development. Of the seven longer 'I am' sayings, for example, which liken Jesus to an interesting range of things, we discover that the first, 'the *Bread of Life*', sits opposite the last, 'the *True Vine*'. They are found in the balancing sections, 2 and 2' of the 1-3,C,3'-1' sectional scheme. The writer clearly intended meaning in this.

This second phase in the church's early writing era may be characterised as a highly creative, most fertile and imaginative one. Without it the newly establishing world faith would have been without its stories of its founder and the faith's beginnings and its stories of the beginnings of the church's mission in the world. Through the skills of the writers and encouragement from patrons and the church alike, the requirement of basic literature was met, was well met and diversely met. And the lessons learned in this phase got carried over into the next, the third (and immediately following) writing phase.

It is in this third phase, according to my hypothesis, that some of the very best compositions of the New Testament were written. I include the Letter to the Hebrews, the First Letter of Peter and the First Letter of John. All three exhibit great skill in Greek composition. The Letter to the Hebrews, to me, is simply outstanding. This third phase in the church's first writing era, then, demonstrates the early church's capacity not only to continue with an exploration of the revelation it had been given, but also to produce the very finest quality of literary work possible. It may be that without this phase the developing religion would still have established itself as a world faith, but it would have been without the writings that give breadth, depth and diversity to its understanding of the person of the Christ and its understanding of the church's calling.

Another book that was likely penned in this third phase is that of the Revelation to John. As a highly symbolic work, it represents a peak in creative and imaginative writing, particularly for its numerology and coded messages. It further demonstrates the capacity of writers to be discovering new issues that needed addressing: in this book, that God is in control and one day all evil will be destroyed.

Lastly in this survey, we turn to what we might call the fourth and final phase of early writing. The third phase may have benefited from the second for more of the same earlier spark of creative and exploratory thinking, but the fourth did definitely not benefit in the same way from the third. It has to be said that the Pastoral Epistles and the Second Letter of Peter are on the defensive. The Pastorals have an interest in affirming teachings from the church's first phase of writing. And IIPeter has an interest in promoting a reading of a particular gospel piece as pure history. One might say that these letters defend selected doctrine and demand simple, unquestioning belief. In these books, significantly, we have the two most important New Testament witnesses to the nature of the prophecies and writings of the 'Scriptures' (IIPeter 1.20-21 and IITim. 3.16). They are not thought up by men, but given by God. They are not to be questioned but believed. (To these writers, such writings are certainly not the products of professional writers who were conscious literary artists and who obeyed convention and imitated correct models, like Hellenistic authors!)

It is just possible that we can discern criticism of the debates that the writings of the second phase spawned. These later books rail against 'myths'. (Are these the 'truths told in story form', as found in the Gospels?) One rails against claims that 'the resurrection has already taken place'. (Is this to be found in Matthew's Gospel, Mt. 27.51-53?) One impatiently warns, 'Avoid genealogies.' (The genealogies of Matthew and Luke do exhibit irreconcilable differences, but do reward close study of their schemes: cf. 3x14 and 11x7. Is the reference to these?) And lastly, while their common call for 'Godliness' and 'good works' is fine in itself, we might ask if such does not signal a kind of desperation to control: having attempted to control the faith of believers, now they attempt to control their behaviour? Is it not the case that the writings of the second phase of writing simply posed too many, uncomfortable questions for these writers?

In ways, as in all the above, we can now move forward in describing the grand and the detailed purposes of the New Testament works, the influence of world affairs upon them and the influence of earlier writers upon later ones. We interestingly also discover the indelible mark of diversity, contradiction and tension in these writings. This period, of the church's writing response to the revelation it had been given, was clearly a time for exploration and experimentation in regard to all matters pertaining to the faith. It was also a time when all human skills and disciplines were offered to the divine task. Above all else it was a time when the human mind searched the mind of God with a passion. The unity of purpose lay in the conviction that Jesus the Christ and Son of God was *the* revelation of God in the world.

The writers, then, had things to tell and purposes to fulfil for the church. But as we come to the end of this study, there is a point to be made, and made very clearly. It was not the audience that was to be reading what the writer actually wrote down. Between the audience and the writer stood the reader, or reciter. The writer wrote expressly, therefore, for him (her?). Only through the reader or reciter, and not through the text itself, technically speaking, did what was in the mind of the writer reach the minds of his intended audience. In short, the writer in the era of early Christianity had a responsibility to his audience for what he purposed to say to it, and also a responsibility to his reader/reciter who would deliver his presentation. The writing responsibility, therefore, was twofold. Each text had a 'public' function *and* a 'private' one, or it had an 'external' purpose and an 'internal' one.

Yet, once the audiences heard, say, the presentations of the first phase of writing, it was their questioning of the first that surely led to the next, and in turn, to all subsequent phases of development which led eventually to the formation of the New Testament Canon between, say, 170 and 220 AD. In all the centuries since, of course, the questioning has continued so that, besides the New Testament Books, we have all manner of additional church-produced material which requires our attention. How we face up to the big questions today has much to do with how we understand the questionings and the answerings of the past!