

# THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

## CHAPTER 2:

### AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTS

## IMPORTANT NOTICE:

This course is a revised traduction of the work "I Fondamenti del Cristianesimo" written by Rev. Piero Ottaviano and Didaskaleion.

The course is divided into units with a logical sequence. Therefore we suggest you to read them following their progressive order.

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## 2 INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTS

In this section we shall examine:

- 1) The problems with Christian records
- 2) The books in the first Centuries
- 3) The canon of the New Testament
- 4) The transmission of the texts of the New Testament
- 5) General conclusions

### 2.1 THE PROBLEMS

We have seen, mainly through evidence provided by non-Christian authors of the 1st and 2nd century, that the existence of Jesus is proven; he lived indeed in the 1st century and was the founder of Christianity.

But the information as given by such authors is definitely not enough for us to get to know about Jesus' thought and deeds.

In such instance, the ideal thing would be to have some writings by Jesus himself, but, since we have none - at least so far - **we have to turn to his disciples' (and there are many!).**

**We will examine only *the Christian documents of the 1st and 2nd century***, for the later ones would date back too far from the events to offer enough guarantee for historical reliability.

As regards such documents (as well as the above-mentioned literature by non-Christian historians) we unfortunately ***have no original texts***, but only manuscript copies, the most ancient among which (at the present stage of research) date back to the 3rd century<sup>1</sup>.

In 1988 Prof. Y.K. Kim suggested that the papyrus called P<sup>46</sup> (Chester Beatty), which holds a great part of the New Testament, be dated back to A.D. 90. But it still takes further confirmation, to have such proposal accepted.

We know that, when documents are copied by hand, mistakes are very likely to occur.

**We may wonder whether the text can be restored to their former draft, as if they had just been written by their very authors.**

**We call this the question about the text's transmission.**

When considering the ancient books that we have, we immediately realize that these books were not all regarded as having the same importance in Christian communities. As a matter of fact, we have thousands copies of some - as written between the 3rd and 15th centuries - whereas of some others we only have a few copies, sometimes even incomplete ones.

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<sup>1</sup> A 2nd century manuscript, called P52, has also been found, but it is very small and so it is of no use for the text's restoration.

This can be explained through the fact that the former were read in public in the various Christian churches - and it was therefore necessary to raise more copies, some of them thus surviving the wear of time - whereas the latter would not.

Another question then arises:

**Why were the former (and still are) read in public during Christian liturgies whereas the latter are not?**

**We call this the canon question (canon = list of the official Christian books).**

## 2.2 THE BOOKS IN THE EARLY COMMUNITIES (1<sup>ST</sup> AND 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURIES)

### 2.2.1 WHY THEY WERE WRITTEN

Since a Christian is a person who engages him/herself to live according to Jesus' teachings, he/she needs to know about Jesus' actual thought. And since Jesus has left no writings for us to find (for the time being) the early Christians, in order to solve the problem, had to turn to the **apostles**, who had witnessed of what Jesus had said and done.

One for all, John's testimony:

*"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched... this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life" (1st John 1,1).*

The apostles were therefore the living rule of Christian faith, since they reported Jesus' teachings. But since the apostles were eventually beginning to pass away, it became more and more necessary to turn to the books which would somehow draw on them. In fact, once there would no longer be any eye-witnesses, it would no longer be possible to control the veracity of what kept on being preached about Jesus, particularly in case of any possible new statement concerning him. Furthermore, as Christianity was spreading, it was no longer that easy to succeed in finding an apostle and to possibly make the necessary verifications.

### DOCUMENTS:

**\* The prologue from the Gospel according to Luke reads thus:**

*"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and (have become) servants of the word; therefore since I myself have carefully investigated from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write (as a result) an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1,1-4).*

\* **2nd letter of Peter**

*"... and the generosity of our Lord means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters: they contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and instable people distort, as they do with other scriptures, to their own perdition" (2 Peter 3,15-16).*

In this letter, which was written circa A.D. 66/67 or 75, assumption is made that there existed a collection - at least a partial one - of Pauls' epistles. Such collection of letters would then be regarded as having the same importance as the New Testament, if by the word "scriptures" we understand a reference to the Old Testament itself.

\* **Epistle to the Colossians**

*"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Colossians 4,16).*

This letter was written by Paul about A.D.61/63, as he was a prisoner in Rome.

Such Christian writings were read during the meetings of the community, along with the texts from the Old Testament, which were already being read in Jewish synagogues.

That the books from the Old Testament were already going around among the various Christian communities is proved by their being largely quoted from in early Christian books.

**DOCUMENTS:**

\* **Paul's 1st epistle to the Thessalonians**

*"I beseech you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers" (1 Thess. 5,27).*

\* **Epistle to the Colossians (4,16) already quoted above.**

\* **Justin, a Christian philosopher, thus wrote in A.D. 155:**

*"... And on the days called by the name of the Sun, people coming from both town and country are assembled in one place and read the Apostles' memoirs (gospels) and prophetic writings (the Old Testament) until time runs out.*

*When the reader is finished, the provost (head) delivers a speech to counsel and urge people to imitate such good examples" (1a Apologia - n. 67)*

But when they were written, such Christian books were not regarded as "Holy Scriptures", yet. To the early Christians the **"Holy Scriptures" still consisted of the Old Testament.**

*Paul's first text being mentioned as Holy Scripture is quoted from in Polycarpus' epistle to the Philippians (12,1), written about year A.D. 150:*

*"I know that you are keen readers of the Holy Scriptures and that nothing of what is written therein escapes you - which, unfortunately is not my case -. Nevertheless, I just wish to remind you about these passages only: "In your anger do not sin" (Psalm 4,5); and "Do not let the sun go down upon your wrath = while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4,26). Blessed is the one who keeps them in mind, as I feel confident that you do!"*

### 2.2.2 AUTHORS

A lot of these scriptures were *directly, or indirectly*, ascribed (sometimes *pretendedly*) to the Apostles, whose authority in Christian churches was undisputed. As a matter of fact, Christians would trust them because they were witnesses of the life of Jesus (who is both the founder and the root of Christianity) and churches had been founded as a result of their testimony.

#### DOCUMENTS:

Many books are entitled according to the Apostles' names: e.g.: the Gospel according to *Matthew*, according to *John*, *Pauls' epistles* and so on.

Since the very beginning of Paul's preaching, anyway, someone had already tried to spread pretended letters of him. Paul himself would confirm thus:

*"... we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy/spirit, report or letter supposed to have come from me..." (2 Thess 2,1-2)".*

This letter bears this closing:

*"I, Paul write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters: this is how I write" (2 Thess. 3,17).*

We know about a lot of gospels and letters being ascribed to the Apostles but not accepted by the Church (*apocrypha*): the Gospels according to *James, Peter, Thomas...* As regards the Gospel according to *Peter*, we have mention of it from Eusebius of Caesarea, who quoted from Serapis of Antioch (see Chapter 2.3.2 c.). Do also notice that in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries all the letters which were sent to Christian churches would imitate the style of Paul's letters; e.g.: the one written by Clement of Rome, or the ones written by Ignatius of Antioch. This means that they were well known.

\* *Justin* reports:

*"... the Apostles, in their own written memoirs called the Gospels..." (1a Apologia, n. 66)*

\* *The Muratorian canon* also reports similar information (see also chapter 2.3.2 c).

### 2.2.3 NEW BOOKS

Also new books were written. They are to be divided in two groups:

- writings which, though not claiming to go back to the Apostles, had similar authoritativeness as the writings which make up the New Testament. They are called ***Apostolic Fathers***, for their authors had known the Apostles;
- kind of fanciful writings, rich in strange doctrines, originated by the will to make up for the gaps of the (canonical) gospels. They were pretendedly ascribed to the Apostles, so that they could be regarded as having as much authoritativeness: they are called ***Apocrypha***, or ***Pseudo-epigraph*** writings.

As books of this kind were rapidly and increasingly spreading, the problem arose to control their authenticity.

### 2.2.4 COPIES

Some letters were copied right from the first: they would look like "circular" letters to be passed on to the various communities.

#### ***Documents:***

\* ***Paul's epistle to the Ephesians:***

*"Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus..." (Ephesians, 1,1).*

Some manuscripts read "in Laodicea" instead of "in Ephesus", others have a blank space, which was probably to be filled in with the city's name of the Christian community to whom each letter was addressed.

It might therefore be the case of a circular letter, whose address was to be changed each time.

\* Compare with the afore-mentioned ***Epistle to the Colossians***, 4,16.

It can be reasonably assumed that, because of their importance to faith, also all other Apostolic writings would be copied so as to be spread among the churches. Hence the spontaneous and gradual forming of collections of writings. Nevertheless, that would not keep Jesus' teachings to be still passed on by word of mouth. Very often even greater importance was attached to such oral traditions than to written ones (we have come to know this from Papias of Hierapolis -just to name one- who lived in the 2nd century).

\* ***This is what the elder (probably John) used to say:***

*"Mark, who had become Peter's interpreter-translator, used to write down carefully everything he could remember, even though he has written the Lord's words and deeds in a disorderly way. He had never listened to the Lord personally, nor had he ever been a follower of his, because only later would he become an intimate friend of Peter's. The latter*

*used to preach the gospel by keeping his audiences' needs in mind, without meaning to make any synthesis or to express himself in general terms as to the Lord's words. Therefore Mark has made no mistake by writing some things as he actually remembered them"*  
(Eusebius, Hist.Eccl. III,39,15).

This can be easily explained by keeping in mind that, in ancient times, very few people could read, and books were very expensive.

Culture was spreading basically by words of mouth.

## 2.3 THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Canon is the list of Christianity's OFFICIAL books: this grants the certainty that they correctly report Jesus' thoughts.

### 2.3.1 THE MAKING UP OF A CANON

This is what the situation in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century was like:

1. Writings:
  - original writings tracing back - whether directly or indirectly - to the Apostles;
  - copies of said writings;
  - writings pretendedly ascribed to the Apostles;
  - writings which did not date back to the apostles' time, but were regarded as having as much authoritativeness.
2. Trustworthy witnesses who could settle the controversy as to the correct attributions of the texts were dying out;
3. A philosophical / theological movement called "Gnosticism" was gaining ground •

"Gnosis" is the Greek word for "Knowledge/cognition".

According to the Gnostics, only knowledge can lead to salvation.

*The Gnostics would generally invoke the principle that Evil abides in the world: it cannot be that God want or do any evil - therefore evil is not from God -. There are two un-created principles: the former - God/spirit - i.e., where Good comes from, the latter - matter - i.e., where Evil comes from. Both principles are perpetually at strife with each other.*

The war zone where such a conflict *between the principle of Good (spirit) and the principle of Evil (matter) takes place* is the heart of men, *for men are made up of both matter and spirit.*

The painful situation man finds himself in caused the mercy of God, who, in turn, sent Jesus to the world to work salvation, i.e., to lead men to true cognition, in order to detach them from matter.



Jesus, being pure spirit (Good), could not have taken on a material body (which would have been Evil). Therefore, to come into the world, he must have taken on a body-like appearance (from the Greek: "dokéo" = I appear/seem; hence the name "Docetes" by which such thinkers were called).

Let us name, for instance: Basil, Carpocrates, Valentine, and, above all Marcion.

In the opinion of Marcion (about A.D. 140) Jesus' actual message, also preached by Paul, was that the Old Testament was definitely overcome and that nothing of it was to be kept. This message has been subsequently altered by the Jews through the introduction of non-authentic writings and the manipulation of the original texts.

Marcion thus rejected the Old Testament in the whole and, as regards the Gospels, he wanted to take them back to "their original form", by eliminating what he thought it to be a subsequent alteration. In short, he refuted the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and John, and, as far as the one according to Luke was concerned, he would leave out the tales of Jesus' childhood and any mention of Jesus' corporeity (as a spirit, Jesus should not show any manifestation of corporeity, such as growing-up, being tired or afraid, suffering, blood-sweating...).

Marcion was the first to make a list of the books where, in his opinion, the true Christian doctrine should be found. Such list comprised: *the Gospel according to Luke* (namely, the version he had revised) and *ten letters of Paul's* (except the pastoral ones).

The Christian communities had to take the following steps against Marcion:

- *by establishing an "orthodox" list (canon), i.e., a relatively fixed list to be regarded as the norm for genuine Christian faith: the New Testament (the criteria for such selection will be explained below);*
- *by entrusting some bishops with the task of controlling the new copies of the New Testament which were being made, in order to make sure that they were true copies of the ancient text<sup>2</sup>.*

The really most important thing was having realized that *a canon was needed*: the churches had to admit that they were no longer able to restrain the pretended traditions about Jesus, which were swarming, and so they started looking for some standards, or criteria, enabling them to establish what books should be accepted, or rejected, in order to be in a position to get to know the genuine Christian thought.

### 2.3.2 STANDARDS OF CANONICITY

From the documents we have we can reckon that two were the main methods adopted by the Church for establishing the canon: *the books were to be ecclesial and apostolic*. In case of doubtful apostolicity, the Church would adopt an additional criterion, i.e., *tradition*. It is presently quite difficult - if not impossible - to ascertain whether the early

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<sup>2</sup> This is where the "*Imprimatur*" (official license to print), which is still in use, comes from: bishops thus guarantee that a Catholic book about Christianity is up to the Christian doctrine and authorize its printing.

Christian communities have done a good job: we have no choice but to trust - or distrust - circumstantial evidences, in want of proofs.

Let us examine them in detail:

### **a) Ecclesiality**

The books regarded as "official" were the ones which had been accepted and read by (almost) all communities who knew them.

*It was the communities themselves who selected the books of the New Testament: this would not happen through any official pronouncements, but through the "sentiment" of Christians, who would agree that such books well established the faith they had received, and accepted, through the preaching.*

But why did Christians read these books?

Here is *the second criterion*:

### **b) Apostolicity**

The books were chosen, which were believed to trace back directly or indirectly to the Apostles (nowadays it is impossible to say whether rightly or wrongly, if not through an act of faith in the early Christian communities).

We can say that the "canon" concept was derived directly from the "Apostle" concept. In the church the Apostles have a unique and unrepeatable function: they are eye-witnesses. As a result, only the Apostles' writings - or their disciples' - are believed to secure the purity of the Christian testimony (O. Cullmann, *Le Nouveau Testament*, Paris 1966).

*As regards the gospels*, the communities believed their authors to either have been apostles or to have well conveyed what they had heard from the Apostles. This is the reason why the *Apocrypha* were rejected.

*As regards the epistles*, it was up to the addressee to vouch for the author. Let us point out, however, that very often the author would have the "fair copy" of the text written by a clerk/copyist.

This is why some writings such as the Didache' and the Epistle of Clement of Rome were not accepted, even though they had been written in the same period and about the same subject as the New Testament.

As a result, to the early Christian communities *the standard of faith* did not not so much consist of the writings as of *the apostolic testimony* which had subsequently been established in such writings:

**Only what was apostolic was also accepted as canonical = (prescriptive).**

### ***What would happen in case of uncertain apostolicity?***

They would appeal to *an additional criterion*, i.e.:

### **c) Tradition:**

The books chosen were those which kept with oral tradition. Rejected were also the books that would portray Jesus in a different way from the traditional one, which the Christians knew well, having heard about it from the lips of both the Apostles and their disciples.

This is what happened, for instance, with the Gospel according to Peter, as reported in this document by Eusebius of Caesarea quoting Serapis' testimony:

*"He (=Serapis) has written another treatise about the so-called Gospel according to Peter, meaning to prove the falseness of the subjects therein, for the sake of some members of the church of Rhossus (Syria), who have become prey to non-orthodox doctrines because of it.*

*He writes as follows:*

*"Dear brothers, we do accept Peter and the other Apostles as we do accept Christ, but, since we are sensible people, we reject what has been pretendedly written under their name, for we do know very well that this is not what we have actually been taught by them. As a matter of fact, when I was with you, I thought that all of you had a sound faith and, since I had not read the Gospel that we were talking about - the one by the name of Peter's - I said, 'If that is the only reason for their anxiety, then let them read it!'. But now, considering what has been reported to me, I realize that they have been nursing heresy in their mind. I will therefore call upon you again. So long, dear brothers.*

*You know what kind of heresy that of Marcion was, and how he contradicted himself, for he did not know what he was spreading; you will learn (the truth) from what I have written down for you. As a matter of fact, I had the chance to come by this gospel through the ones who use it, namely the successors of its authors - whom we call Docetes after the school which many doctrines of theirs belong to -. I had also the opportunity to look through it and ascertain that what is reported there concerning the Saviour is correct on the whole, but some things are new, and I have listed them for you".*

*This is what Serapis reports" (Hist.Eccles. VI, 12,2-6: PG, 20,545).*

It seems therefore that this is what the true and definite standard of **Christian faith** is all about: **the teachings as taught by Jesus through both his words and life as handed on by the Churches' oral traditions.**

Resuming, the CRITERIA BY WHICH THE "CANONICAL" BOOKS WERE CHOSEN are:

- **ECCLESIALITY:** The books were read in all the churches that knew them;
- **APOSTOLICITY:** Their direct - or indirect - author being an apostle;
- **TRADITION:** Because they would portray Jesus in accordance with oral Tradition

To sum up: Jesus' teaching was the most precious thing and it had to be preserved with utmost care. Therefore it needed accurate control.

This is the reason for the quest for witnesses first, and - once the witnesses had died out - for the books which conveyed the true teaching of Jesus.

### 2.3.3 DOCUMENTS

The most ancient list of "canonical" books having reached us is the Muratorian canon, written about A.D. 180 in vernacular Latin by an unknown author and discovered in 1740 A.D. by Ludovico Antonio Muratori in Milan's Ambrosian library.

Some of the text's first lines are missing, but it can be assumed that the author was talking about the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark, for the Gospel according to Luke is introduced as being the third one.

"... that he (Mark?) also witnessed and thus exposed. The third book is the Gospel according to Luke. Luke, a physician, was chosen by Paul to go along with him as a law expert, (or a travel expert, or a doctrine expert) and wrote this gospel after Christ's Ascension, in accordance with what he (Paul) believed. He had not seen the Lord in the flesh, either, and so he began reporting all the accounts he could get, starting from John's birth.

The fourth Gospel is John's, (one) of the disciples. Since both his fellow-disciples and the bishops had been urging him, he once said, "Let us fast for three days, starting from today, and then we shall meet to relate about what has been revealed to each one of us". That very night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John should write down everything under his own name, and that everybody should appraise his account. Therefore, although each book of the Gospels teaches about different principles, this is to be regarded as no difference as far as the believer's faith is concerned. Everything is being taught by the same, unique and regulative Spirit: Jesus' Birth, his double coming: at first (which has already occurred) humble and despised, then illustrious and with royal power (which is still to happen). So where is the oddity in John's constant displaying peculiarities - even in his letters - since he said about himself: "That which we have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears and our hands have touched, this we have written to you"? (1st John 1,1 and following).

In this way, he does nothing but declare that not only is he an eye-and-ear witness, but also an orderly writer of all the wonderful things of the Lord.

Furthermore, the acts of all Apostles are written in one single book. Luke collected for most excellent Theophilus each and every event occurring before his very eyes- and, as a matter of fact, he has omitted Peter's martyrdom and Paul's parting from the Urbe (Rome) on his way to Spain -. Paul's letters do then reveal, to whom it may concern, where he was writing from, and under what circumstances. Firstly, let us consider the one to the Corinthians, meaning to forbid the schism heresy; then the one to the Galatians about the (prohibition of) circumcision; then the one to the Romans (explaining) exactly the Scriptures' order and Christ's being at their beginning. It is necessary to talk about each one of these (letters) in detail. Paul, the blessed apostle, has written nominally to seven churches only, thus following his predecessor's (John) rule, (cp. the Seven Letters in Revelation Ch. 2-3: see further on) in this sequence: the first (letter) to the Corinthians the second to the Ephesians, the third to the Philippians, the fourth to the Colossians, the fifth to the Galatians, the sixth to the Thessalonians, the seventh to the Romans. The ones to Philemon, Titus and Timothy (were written) out of affection and love. They are considered sacred for the honour of the Catholic (= universal) church, for the regulation of ecclesial discipline.

Other (letters) are being circulated, such as the ones to the Laodiceans and to the Alexandrians, which were falsely signed by the sect of Marcion with Paul's name and also many other things which cannot be accepted by the Catholic church.

It is not wise to mix gall with honey. But one letter by Jude and two letters bearing the inscription "By John" are accepted by the Catholic Church, as well as "Wisdom of Solomon" written by Solomon's friends to celebrate him.

Thereafter we accept the Revelations (Apocalypse) of John and Peter only. But some of us do not want it to be read before the church (= assembly).

"The Shepherd" was written some time ago in our city - Rome - by Ermas, whose brother - Bishop Pius - held the chair of the Church of Rome.

Therefore it is surely advisable to read it, but not in public at church, before the congregation, neither along with the prophets, whose number is complete, nor along with the apostles of the final times."

- From the mention: "some time ago" and the mention to the Bishop of Rome, Pius (the First) it is possible to reckon that such account was written about A.D. 180.
- Only 23 are mentioned out of the 27 books which would subsequently make up the New Testament. No mention is made about: one letter of John, one of James, one of Peter and the Epistle to the Hebrew.

#### 2.3.4 CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE CANON

Between the third and fifth Centuries, there followed a period full of doubts and debates as to the books which should belong to the canon.

##### **Document**

A testimony by Eusebius of Caesarea, dating back to A.D. 318:

*"Now having got this far, we deem it reasonable to make a summary (a list) of the books of the New Testament that we have talked about. The Gospel's holy tetrad ("set of four") should undisputedly come first, to be followed by the Acts of the Apostles. Furthermore, Paul's epistles do also deserve to be mentioned, followed by the first one ascribed to John, as well as by Peter's first. In addition to these, if you wish, John's "Revelation", which in time will be the subject for further discussion, as regards what is being thought about it. That is all as far as the universally accepted books are concerned. Among the controversial writings, which are anyway accepted by most people, there is a letter ascribed to James, one of Jude, Peter's second epistle and the so-called 2nd and 3rd Epistles of John - written by the evangelist himself - or by a man by the same name. Among the Apocrypha (literally: illegitimate, spurious) some have placed the book "Acts of Paul", the book called "The Shepherd" and the "Apocalypse" by Peter, followed by the epistle ascribed to Barnabas, and the so-called "Teachings of the Apostles" (Didachè) and, as previously mentioned, by the Revelation of John, if you wish. Some, as also previously mentioned, reject it, but others do count it in the number of the universally accepted books. Some have counted in also the Gospel according to the Hebrew, which is best-liked among the Jews who have believed in Christ. Even though this is what the situation is like, we have anyway deemed it necessary to make a list - by separating the books which are true, genuine and accepted according to the ecclesiastic traditions from the rest, which, unlike the former ones, are not testamentary (= binding) and which are contested - though known - by most ecclesiastic authors; we can thus tell the difference between these books and the books presented by heretical people as having been written by the Apostles - whether Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Matthias or whomever or Acts of Andrew, John or any other Apostle -. Absolutely none of the ecclesiastic authors has ever recognized his memories in any of such books. On the other hand, the features of their speech diverge from the apostolic style by far; the thought and the doctrine expressed therein are both so far from orthodoxy, that they can easily be proved having been made up by heretics. Therefore, they cannot even be counted among the Apocrypha, but are to be rejected, being totally absurd and irreverent" (Hist. Eccl. III, 25,1-7).*

According to the above text, the books belonging to the New Testament having been

omitted, refuted or rejected are: the epistle to the Hebrew, the epistles of James and of Jude, II Peter, both II and III John and Revelation.

- The controversies about the canon had already been settled by the end of the 4th century:
  - in the East: through the XXXIX Paschal letter by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt (A.D. 367)
- in the West: through the synod which was held in Rome in A.D. 382. 27 books, which were believed to have an apostolic origin were accepted as canonical books.

By the end of the 5th century, as disputes about Christ and the Trinity grew weak, all doubts were dispelled, both in Latin churches and in Syria, where an agreement was met thanks to New Testament version as made by Phyloxenes, at the beginning of the 6th century.

From then on and until the 15th century, there were no more controversies about the canon.

The question was then revived by Luther whereas the Council of Trent would confirm the traditional list of official books.

### 2.3.5 CONCLUSION

Believing (as Luther did) that the "standard of faith" should be made up of *mere Scriptures* - i.e, devoid of the tradition of the Church - is a logical mistake, since the Bible does not say which books do belong to the Bible.

***It is the Christian community alone that can establish whether those books are up to the oral tradition's standard, being prior to the very books.***

As a matter of fact, Christianity arose about A.D. 30, whereas the first Christian books were written after A.D. 50. Thus, Christianity had already been spreading for at least 20 years before any Christian books even existed.

As a result, ***Christianity cannot be grounded on books, but on the traditions which have subsequently been secured by the writings.***

### 2.3.6 LIST OF THE BOOKS BELONGING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

The dates of the books' first drafting and the authors' names are the ones being presently accredited by most scholars.

Our books are currently subdivided into chapters and verses, for greater convenience when looking for a passage.

Their subdivision into chapters was first made by an Englishman, Stephen Langton (died in 1228), whereas subdivision into verses was first made by Robert Estienne, a French known as Stephanus in A.D. 1555.

Title	Author	Date	Sigla
Gospel according to Matthew	(Matthew)/?	45 / 80	Matt
Gospel according to Mark	Mark	50 – 65	Mark
Gospel according to Luke	Luke	55 – 75	Luke
Gospel according to John	John	80 – 90	John
Acts (of the apostles)	Paul	62 – 75	Acts
Epistles: Romans	Paul	57	Rom
" 1 and 2 Corinthians	Paul	54 – 57	1-2 Cor
" Galatians	Paul	55	Gal
" Ephesians	Paul	61 – 63	Eph
" Philippians	Paul	61 – 63	Phil
" Colossians	Paul	61 – 63	Col
" 1 and 2 Thessalonians	Paul	50 – 52	1-2 Thess
" 1 and 2 Timothy	Paul ?	60 – 67	1-2 Tim
" Titus	Paul ?	60 – 67	Tit
" Philemon	Paul	61 – 63	Philem
" Hebrews	Pauline circle	64 – 67 ?	Heb
" James	James	50 – 58 ?	Jas
" 1 Peter	Peter	60 – 65	1 Pet
" 2 Peter	?	60 – 75 ?	2 Pet
" Jude	Jude?	70 – 80 ?	Jude
" 1, 2, 3 John	John	80 – 100	1-2-3 John
Revelation	John		Rev

## 2.4 TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

### 2.4.1 ABOUT THE CERTAINTY TO BE IN POSSESSION OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT.

Once it has been ascertained which the official books of Christianity are, and considering how they were chosen, we can then answer the question as to whether we can be sure that we are in possession of the original text.

a) We cannot be so sure as regards non-canonical books, for we have (very) few manuscripts - which, in turn, are not even ancient enough to be fully compared with one another - enabling us to establish what the original text was probably like.

Anyway, we usually tend not to be hypercritical about them and we suppose that the text was quite well transmitted (any possible manipulation should have to be proved: this is a principle that ought to be applied to all ancient books).

b) As for the canonical books, we should take a closer look at the question.

Since the original texts are missing, we have to avail ourselves of ancient manuscripts, in order to be able to restore the texts.

There are over 5,200 manuscripts, written between the 2nd and 15th centuries.

## 2.4.2 REFLECTIONS ON THE MANUSCRIPTS

**According to the material** they are made of, manuscripts can be either papyruses or parchments.

- **The papyruses** of the New Testament are the most ancient records that we presently have (some date back to the 3rd century and one even to the 2nd century) and, although they are not complete, they are very important testimony for the text because of their antiquity.

They are presently 72 and have been classified as P1, P2... p72.

The most important among them are: P52: Ryland Papyrus, dating back to circa A.D. 125, holding the verses of John 18,3b-33a on its face and John 37b-38 overleaf. It is being kept in Manchester.

P45,P46,47: Chester Beatty papyruses, dating back to the 3rd century (1): they make up altogether almost all of the New Testament. They are being kept in Dublin.

- **Parchments** (the word parchment derives from Pergamum, a town of Mysia, Turkey) are made from the skin of sheep or goats. They are very strong and so they fit well for the drafting of important documents which are due to last. The books written on parchment paper are called "**codices**".

The most important codices are:

**B:** *The Vatican Codex*: 4th-5th century, almost complete (Rome);

**S:** *The Sinai Codex*: 4th-5th century, complete (London);

**A:** *Alexandrian Codex*: 5th Century, almost complete (London);

**C:** *Ephraim Codex* (palimpsest), almost complete (Paris);

**D:** *Beza's Codex*: 5th-6th century, it holds the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles (Cambridge);

**F:** *Koridethi's Codex*: 9th century, complete (Tiflis).

## 2.4.3 THE TOOLS FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT'S ORIGINAL TEXT

Since the original text of the New Testament is missing, its restoration can be possible through the following documents:

### a) **Copies of the original Greek text**

They are the main means for the text's restoration. Each copy was derived from a more ancient manuscript.

Note that each manuscript is an independent entity, which depends on a model, but is not reproduced as exactly. Copyists are often likely to let mistakes in their copies, whether out of carelessness or misunderstanding (clerical error, progressive mistake), when it is not the case of intentional corrections. To create a manuscript, copyist had sometimes to avail them-selves of a couple - or more - of manuscripts and compare (collate) them. Sometimes, at the end of a manuscript a colophon is to be found, i.e., a closing sentence holding various information about the editor, when and where the copy was made, and the



"preceding manuscript", or the source the copy was derived from (a sort of "pedigree" of the copy).

#### b) ***Ancient versions***

We have also versions of the Greek New Testament in ancient languages.

Let us mention some:

- *The Syriac version*, called "Peshitta", dating back to 2nd century;
- *the Coptic versions* of the 2nd century;
- *Vetus Latina*, which is placed about A.D. 150;
- *the Vulgate*, revised by Jerome about A.D. 400, written in Latin.

By analyzing the ancient translations, which were literal ones, we should be able to get back to the Greek text used by the translator, provided the latter has done a good job.

#### c) ***Quotations by the Fathers of the Church***

The New Testament was widely quoted and expounded by early Christian authors (2nd - 9th centuries), i.e., the Fathers of the Church.

It has been written that, if ever the text of the New Testament should be lost, it could be totally restored through the quotations of the Fathers.

It is true indeed that such authors lived some many centuries later, but it is also true that they would present the text as it was read and interpreted in their own time, namely, long before the existence of most codices we have today.

As a result, to restore the text, we can get back through written documents to the 3rd, and perhaps even to the 1st century.

This means that it was a rather short lapse of time between the original writings and the first complete copies that we have.

Notice that it took a shorter time between the original manuscripts of the New Testament and the first copy that ever reached us, than between any other kind of ancient text and its relevant first copy.

### 2.4.4 THE DOCUMENTS' "VARIATIONS"

Although very close in time to the original ones, these documents do not all hold the same text: on the contrary, there are many differences among them, called "variations". This is quite normal, when you think that ancient texts were written by hand and, generally, from dictation.

In the whole of the New Testament, altogether about 250,000 variations were found about 150,000 words. But such high figure has to be reduced, since very often many variations affect one single word or sentence, most of them being nothing but literary forms which do not alter its meaning.

There are about 200 variations changing the meaning of some sentences and only about fifteen of them are really important ones.

#### 2.4.5 THE PROCESSING OF A TEXT RESTORATION

As a result of the presence of such variations, we might wonder whether it would ever be possible to have the original text restored, as though it had just been written by its original author.

The science/art of trying to restore an original text suspected of having been altered - or at least to get as close as possible to the original - is called "**textual criticism**".

In order to do this, scholars work on the text as follows:

a) They try *to cut down* on the great number of manuscripts so as to end up with just a few, influential ones;

In order to do this, they study the manuscripts' variations, so as to classify them under groups of "families" and then try to establish which ones are the "sources" where the others have derived from. They end up with about seventy "source"-manuscripts.

b) *They collate such "sources"*:

- If they all hold the same text, then the text is accepted;
- should any difference be found within the texts, they try to establish, through adequate criteria, the one which might have been written by the author (but they also put a notice - meant for other scholars - indicating the variations of other manuscripts);

c) They produce *a critical edition* (see specimen below).

The latest critical editions are: the one by Protestant and the one by Catholic A.Merk.

#### 2.4.6 THE RESULTS

By applying some criteria which are by now commonly accepted by scholars, we are today in a position to maintain that most probably the current version of the New Testament reads today as it used to when it first was written by its original authors and that its text almost certainly reads today like it used to in the 3rd century<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, it is the Church (= all Christians) that actually vouches for the text's being substantially preserved unabridged. In fact, ever since the first half of the 2nd century the Church has been very concerned in having all new copies controlled so as to make sure that these have been made in compliance with the more ancient texts - namely the very texts that would be constantly read in the various communities and were consequently well known -. That the Church has done excellent control it is also proved by the fact that a lot of manuscripts which have been discovered in the current century cannot but confirm the text that scholars had previously restored.

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<sup>3</sup> And yet, should anybody claim that the text of the New Testament has been manipulated, he could not be proved to be wrong (nor could he prove his claim to be right). The various attempts which have been made by both Protestants and Catholics in the latest 150 years have led to almost the same results.

## 2.5 GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

If you want to study Christianity as it actually is, without making up anything, you need to take three preliminary steps as if they were as many acts of faith:

1. The text we have today is as close as possible to the original one (you ought to feel confident that the first Christian communities have correctly preserved the New Testament);
2. We shall choose and suggest the reading of the Christian texts we deem as the more significant ones for the comprehension of these principles (you should trust us);
3. You ought to believe that our translation from the Greek has been properly made (again, you should trust us);

We point out that the second act of faith, the one concerning our choice, requires a very small effort. Our choosing the text to be introduced does nothing but fill the need for concision; we shall not but quote the texts we regard as fundamental for our treatise. Of course you may read the whole of the New Testament on your own and, should you find any better passage, please do let us know.

Even the third act of faith (the one about our translation from the Greek) is easy to achieve. Granted that it is made as literally as possible on the New Testament's Greek text as published by Nestle (27th Edition), you can easily verify it or have it verified by some expert. We are ready for debate.

On the other hand, we do need a translation so that we can communicate with whomever does not know ancient Greek.

If you do not feel like taking these three steps, you might as well stop reading this book.