

# The Gospels As Books Of History

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## 1. Name. —

"Gospel" comes from Anglo-Saxon "godspell" meaning "good tidings... good news", "godspell" is a translation of Greek *evangelion*. Greek was the language chiefly spoken by the early Christians (Pope Saint Victor I, 189-198, was the first to write in Latin); that is why the Gospels (except the Gospel of Saint Matthew), as well as the rest of the books of the New Testament, were written in Greek. Saint Matthew's Gospel was written in Aramaic-like Hebrew; it was the language generally spoken in Palestine at the time; it was the language Our Lord spoke. But Saint Matthew's Gospel was shortly afterwards translated into Greek. It is this Greek translation which is in the New Testament; and it is from this Greek translation that the quotations from Saint Matthew's Gospel, made by early ecclesiastical writers whose works have come down to us, are taken.

The word *evangelion* originally meant any "good tidings," but in the course of time it came to signify certain "good tidings" — those namely which the Roman Emperors were supposed to have brought to mankind. Thus, an inscription of about the year 9 B.C. — found towards the end of the 19th century during excavations at the ancient city of Priene (modern Samsun) in Asia Minor — commemorating the birth of the Emperor Augustus, says that his birth was the beginning of "good tidings" for the whole world. The early Christians naturally regarded the birth of Our Lord as in a very special way "good tidings" for the human race; and they adopted the word *evangelion* (in English "gospel") to signify the "good tidings of salvation" brought by Jesus Christ. Thus, what Our Lord and His Apostles preached was referred to briefly as the "gospel"; and when that "gospel" was put into four books by Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, these books came themselves to be known as "gospels."

Saint Justin, a pagan philosopher who became a Christian about 130, and died for the faith about 165, is the earliest writer known to us who used the word "gospel" to signify both the teaching of Our Lord, and the books in which that teaching is contained. Saint Irenaeus, who died Bishop of Lyons in 202, constantly uses the word in these two meanings; and this two-fold meaning has been attached to the word "gospel" ever since.

## 2. Historical Value of the Gospels. -

The Gospels can be looked at from two points of view: (1) as inspired books; (2) merely as books of history. We know that they are inspired — that is, that Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired by God to write them, and were so helped by Him — though each of these saints preserved his individuality, and had to take as much trouble to write as if he was not inspired at all — that God is really the Author of the Gospels (Council of Trent, Session 4). In this pamphlet, however, we are not looking at the Gospels as inspired books; we are taking them as if they were merely books of history — as if they were not inspired — and the question we have to answer is this: Are they reliable books of history?

We will apply the same test to them as we would to any other books of history in the world.

How can we tell whether a book of history is trustworthy or not? Here is a "History of the Reign of King Edward VII," let us suppose. How can we be sure that it is true and reliable? We can be sure of it if we can be sure of these three things: (1) that the author was a well-informed and honest writer — one who was in a position to know what he was writing about; (2) that he gave the facts as they really occurred; and (3) that the book has come down to us without any substantial alteration. So long as these three conditions are fulfilled it makes no difference how old the book may be; some of the most reliable books of history in the world are very old — much older than the Gospels. Thus, the authoritative account of the great Persian invasion of Greece is that by Herodotus, who died about the year 425 B.C., and the best history of the Peloponnesian War is that by Thucydides, who died about 401 B.C. Nor would it make any difference if our copies of that old book were only a translation, so long as the translation was a good one and faithfully expressed the sense of the original.

Historical facts do not change with length of years or by being told in a different language — it will be always true, for instance, that a great European War began in 1914 and ended in 1918. No matter what changes may come over the world, that fact will never change; and though we can imagine a future before the world so long that the English language may die out, the historians of that very distant future, writing, perhaps, in an as yet unknown tongue, will still record the unchangeable fact that a European War began in 1914 and ended in 1918.

We shall see that these three conditions are fulfilled by the Gospels, considered simply as books of history — the men who wrote the Gospels were well-informed and honest writers; they could not possibly have been mistaken or deceived as to the facts of Our Lord's life and teaching; their aim was to tell the truth and nothing but the truth — they had no wish to deceive anyone; indeed, if they wrote anything that was untrue, their error would have been speedily shown up, for the vast majority of the people of the time were deadly opposed to Christianity and only too anxious to discover any flaws in the Gospels; and, finally, the Gospels have come down to us substantially the same as they were written by Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Considered simply and solely as books of history, therefore, the Gospels are absolutely true and reliable.

### 3. Who Wrote the Gospels? -

The Gospels are headed "The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Saint Matthew... according to Saint Mark... according to Saint Luke... according to Saint John." You notice that it is said: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to, and so on, for there is but one gospel (evangelion, "good tidings") — that of Jesus Christ — but that one gospel has come down in four books called "Gospels" written by these four Saints (or, as they are generally called, Evangelists — from Greek *evangelistes*, originally a "bringer of good tidings," later "a writer of the gospel"). That they were the writers can be easily proved.

Before the end of the 2nd century, everyone acknowledged Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the authors. Thus (to mention only a very few) Saint Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*, written about A.D. 180, says that "Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, when Peter and Paul were preaching the glad tidings in Rome and founding the Church there. After their death Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, wrote what had been preached by Peter. Luke, too, companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by Paul. Later on, John the disciple of the Lord, who had reclined on His breast, published his Gospel while living at

Ephesus in Asia." Saint Irenaeus's words are of exceptional weight in the matter, because he had as master in his younger days Saint Polycarp (69-155), who had been a disciple of Saint John, author of the Fourth Gospel. It is impossible that he could have made any mistake as to the writers of the Gospels. Furthermore, he had lived both in the East and the West — his youth was passed in Asia Minor where he was born, he spent some time in Italy, and died Bishop of Lyons, France.

In these widely-distant places there was but one view regarding the writers of the Gospels — namely, that Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the authors.

The Muratorian Canon (or Fragment) — first part missing — is in the Ambrosian Library at Milan) drawn up about A.D. 170; Tatian's Diatessaron (a "Harmony of the Four Gospels") composed about same year; the Titles ("according to Matthew... Mark... Luke... John") prefixed to the Gospels, probably between 100 and 150; Saint Polycarp (wrote about 112-118) ; Saint Ignatius (wrote about 107) — all these (and there are many more) bear witness to the fact that Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the authors of the Gospels. These writers were not, of course, the first to believe that Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the Gospels — they were but recording a belief which had come down from the first century.

Now no mistake could possibly have been made in the matter in the first century, for there were many persons living at that time who had personally known the Apostles — who had, as it were, grown up with the Church, and who could not make any mistake about the authors of the Gospels. Saint John, the "beloved Disciple," and who was the author of the Fourth Gospel, was himself alive, and if it was wrong to attribute the Gospels to Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and himself, he would certainly have said so. Well, they were always attributed to these four Saints, and never to anyone else. We may take it as certain, therefore, that Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the Gospels.

#### 4. Well-informed and Reliable Writers. -

That these Saints were well-informed and reliable writers, and that we can absolutely accept what they tell us, is beyond any manner of doubt. For who were they?

Two of them, the writers of the First and Fourth Gospels, were Apostles of Our Lord. They were with Him throughout His entire public life, they saw the miracles He performed, and they heard from His own lips the doctrines He taught. There could be no possibility of their being mistaken as to what they saw and heard. Further, He used to explain difficult points to them in private, and He did this because they were to carry on His work after His death. (See Saint Matthew 13:36; Saint Mark 4:34.)

So far as the First and Fourth Gospels are concerned, therefore, it is plain that those who wrote them were well-informed and reliable. A moment's reflection will show us that the same is true of the other Gospels.

The Second Gospel is by Saint Mark. Who was Saint Mark? He was the disciple and companion — nowadays we would call him "secretary" — of Saint Peter, the Chief of the Apostles. Saint Jerome — perhaps the greatest biblical scholar that ever lived — tells us that "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, wrote at the petition of the brethren in Rome a brief Gospel, according to what he had heard Peter preaching. And when Peter heard of this, he approved it, and of his own authority ordered it to be read in the Churches, as Clement in the Sixth Book of his Outlines, and Papias the Bishop of Hierapolis tell us." Saint Clement (Pope about 90-97) and Papias (lived about

60-135) were "Apostolic Fathers" — that is, personally knew one or more of the Apostles or their disciples. Papias states that "Mark, having been Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately all that he remembered... He took heed to one point only — to omit none of the facts that he had heard, and to state nothing falsely." Obviously, then, the writer of the Second Gospel was well-informed and reliable.

The Third Gospel is by Saint Luke. Who was Saint Luke? The disciple and companion — "secretary" — of Saint Paul. Saint Paul was miraculously converted on his way to Damascus by Our Lord Himself, who taught him what to preach (Galatians 1:12); about A.D. 37 he visited the Apostles Saints Peter and James, and about 50 he met all the Apostles. Clearly, he knew the facts about Our Lord. Saint Luke was taught by Saint Paul — he was with him for years — and could not, therefore, be mistaken in what he states in his Gospel. Anyone reading the opening words of both his Gospel and his later book the Acts of the Apostles, cannot help but be impressed by the meticulous care that Luke took in composing his works and the anxiety he had in telling the honest truth.

It is beyond doubt, therefore, that Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were well-informed and reliable writers; consequently, we can unhesitatingly believe what is stated in the Gospels.

#### 5. Could Not Have Been Deceived. -

They could not have been mistaken or deceived about Our Lord. There are certain things which even the dullest and most ignorant of men could not be deceived about. No one, for example, could be mistaken about such things as a dead person being restored to life, or a person born blind seeing, or a deaf and dumb person hearing and speaking. But these very things the Apostles saw and related. Nor could they have been deceived as to the reality of Our Lord's resurrection from the dead, for they saw Him after His resurrection not merely once, but several times; not for a brief second, but for such periods of time as to exclude all possibility of deception or doubt, for they conversed with Him, received instruction from Him, partook of food with Him. The writers of the Gospels, then, could not possibly have been mistaken or deceived about the facts of Our Lord's life and teaching. They could not have been in a better position to know what they were writing about.

#### 6. Did Not Wish to Deceive. -

In writing the Gospels they certainly had no wish to deceive anyone; their one aim was to state the truth, and nothing but the truth. Why should they wish to deceive? What had they to gain by stating anything that was untrue? Let us try to look at the facts, as they existed in their time. Our Lord had been put to death, and they knew only too well that the same fate would await themselves if they tried to propagate the Christian religion. Their only hope of escaping persecution and death lay in saying nothing about Christ, in simply forgetting all about Him and living as they had lived before they became His followers. They knew that as well as we do. Now, people may be ready to endure persecution for the truth, but no one will do so for a lie. We may be quite sure, therefore, that the writers of the Gospels did not wish to write anything that was untrue. What they wrote, they wrote because it was true; and because it was true they gladly endured bitter persecution from the enemies of Christianity.

#### 7. Could not Deceive. -

But even supposing that they wrote what was untrue, a moment's reflection will show us that their mistake could not possibly escape detection. In their day, Christianity was derided and hated, and

every effort in the power of men was used to stamp it out. Now, suppose there was anything untrue in the Gospels — what would have happened? The untruth would have been turned against the Gospels and against Christianity itself. For instance, it is stated in Saint Luke's Gospel that Our Lord raised a widow's son to life just outside the city of Naim. If that were not true, we may be sure that someone would have pointed it out. Saint Luke's Gospel was written only some thirty years after Our Lord's time; there must surely have been some people, who lived in Naim when Our Lord visited it, who were still living when Saint Luke's Gospel was written. But no one denied that a widow's son was raised from death to life there by Our Lord — it was too plain a truth to be denied. In the same way, if the writers of the Gospels had made any false statement regarding anything else, they would have been shown up by the opponents of Christianity.

To sum up, it is certain that the writers of the Gospels were not mistaken or deceived in what they wrote; that they had no intention of deceiving us by writing what was untrue, but intended to state the truth and nothing but the truth; and that they could not possibly have written what was untrue without being found out. It is evident, therefore, that the Gospels are true, and that we may unhesitatingly believe what is stated in them.

#### 8. When Written. -

When exactly were the Gospels written? They do not state the date themselves, but though no date of publication appears on a book it is generally possible to tell the period when it was written by examining the book itself. The reason is because a writer will naturally speak of things as they existed when he wrote the book, so that if he speaks of, let us say, Pope Pius IX as "the reigning Pontiff," we know at once that he wrote during the time that Pope Pius IX was Head of the Church. Suppose we come across a "History of Germany" with the title-page which bore the date torn out and lost. Can we tell when it was written? Since the date has been lost the only way we can find out is by reading the book. We do so, and we find that Alsace-Lorraine is described as "a German imperial territory." Now if we can find out when Alsace-Lorraine was part of the German Empire we can tell when that "History of Germany" must have been written. Alsace-Lorraine was ceded by France to Germany as a result of the Franco-German War of 1870-1871, and the German Empire, as we know it, was also created as a result of that war. Therefore, the "History" cannot have been written before the Franco-German War. Since then, however, there has been another war, and as a consequence further changes in the map of Europe. As a result of the European War of 1914-1918 Alsace-Lorraine has gone back to France, and can no longer be described as "a German imperial territory." Consequently, the "History" must have been written before the European War of 1914-18. Putting these two things together, we see that it must have been written between the years 1871 and 1919.

Now there were two outstanding facts in the first century of the Christian era, and if we examine the Gospels in the light of these two facts, we shall be able to say approximately when they must have been written. The first of these facts was the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70; the second was the rise, towards the end of that century, of heretical sects denying the divinity of Our Lord. The destruction of Jerusalem was the end of a chapter — indeed, history has nothing to show which produced so profound a change in so short a time, with the possible exception of the Great War of 1914, from the effects of which we are still suffering. Jerusalem and the Temple were razed to the ground, and if the figures given by the celebrated Jewish historian, Josephus (he was a commander-in-chief during the war between the Jews and the Romans A.D. 66-70) are correct, eleven hundred thousand Jews succumbed during the siege of Jerusalem, which lasted less than seven months, and

ninety-seven thousand were taken prisoners. There was a complete change in the order of things as it had existed up to then, but of this profound change, there is not a word in the Gospels.

The writers of the Gospels certainly lived in the Holy Land before the year 70, for the Jerusalem and the Jewish religious observances they speak of were those that obtained before 70. They lived before 70; did they write before 70? Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke certainly did. For here is a very remarkable fact. These three writers give Our Lord's prophecy about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem — but they do not say a word about its having taken place. Hence, they must have written before 70; for if they wrote after 70 they could have pointed triumphantly to the prophecy and its fulfilment. Just as a person who wrote of Alsace-Lorraine as "a German imperial territory" must have written before 1919, so the first three Gospels which speak of things in the Holy Land as they existed before the fall of Jerusalem, and which prophesy that fall but say nothing about its having happened, must have been written before the year 70.

Now let us look at the second of these two outstanding facts — the rise, towards the end of the first century A.D., of heretical sects denying the divinity of Our Lord. One of the main aims of Saint John in writing his Gospel was to refute these heresies; consequently, he must have written towards the end of the first century.

How long before 70 were the Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke written? Well, they were not written before Our Lord's Ascension, for they record His Ascension. Their date must be placed after the Ascension (about A.D. 30-33), and before the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70); and though we cannot say anything for certain, we shall probably not be far out if we say that Saint Matthew's Gospel — the Aramaic original text — was written about 50-63, and the Greek translation of that Gospel about 54-66; that Saint Mark's Gospel was written about 55-62; Saint Luke's about 59-62; and Saint John's about 85-97.

#### 9. Gospels Substantially Unchanged. -

A) That the Gospels as we have them today are substantially the same as when they were written is a fact recognized by biblical scholars. How they reached it is an interesting story, which we can give but very briefly here. Nowadays we can print any number of copies of a book and be sure that they will all be the same. But what of the days before printing was invented? It came into use only in the 15th century; before that time the only way to get a copy of a book was to write it out by hand, and if you wish to see how easy it is for even careful people to make mistakes when copying anything, you need only write out a few pages from any book yourself. You are pretty certain to find that you will not copy it as accurately as you thought. So it is not surprising to find that in the days before printing was invented and the Gospels were all written out by hand, quite a number of differences — variant readings, they are called — existed between the various copies. When printing came into use, the problem was to get the true text of the Gospels. How did scholars set about finding it? They got as many copies of the Gospels, and of works in which there were quotations from the Gospels, as possible, in order to compare them with one another, and eliminate readings found only in a few copies and, therefore, unlikely to be correct; and they paid particular attention to the ages of the copies, for generally speaking the older the copy the more likely (for a reason which we shall see in Point 'D' of this section) is it to be correct.

Then they put them into three groups — all the Greek ones together, all the translations into other languages together, and all the other writings — works of early Christian writers who quoted the Gospels — together.

The Greek ones are known as Gospel "manuscripts." A "manuscript" literally means a "document written by hand"; but though all those ancient copies of which we are speaking were written by hand, and, therefore, would seem to have a strong claim to be called "manuscripts," biblical scholars reserve the term "manuscript" for Greek copies of the Gospels made before the invention of printing.

B) Translations are known as "versions." The early Christian writers are spoken of as "Fathers." So we label the three groups: (1) Manuscripts — all in Greek; (2) Versions — in languages other than Greek; and (3) Fathers — ancient Christian writers who quoted the Gospels.

Now, what was the idea of putting these documents into these three groups? It was found the best way of discovering the original text of the Gospels. Let us take, for instance, the problem which presented itself to Catholics in the sixteenth century when versions of the New Testament, made by Protestants and with a number of passages wrongly given in order to advance Protestantism, were circulated among the people. The best way to counteract a faulty translation is to publish a correct translation: and this is what was achieved by Catholic scholars at the English College at Rheims in 1582. They took as the basis of their translation the Vulgate version made by Saint Jerome, and of which we shall have a word to say later.

C) We saw that in the days before printing a number of differences, or "variant readings," had got into the copies of the Gospels. By carefully studying the older copies of the Vulgate the translators were enabled to put aside a number of these variant readings as wrong; when it was impossible to decide, from the copies of the Vulgate, which was the right reading, the passage was looked up in the Greek manuscripts, the Versions, and the Fathers, and in this way the correct reading was generally discovered. It was, of course, a slow and laborious process; and when you think of all the hours those patient Catholic scholars of the sixteenth century had to spend trying to find out which of the many different readings was the right one, you may be inclined to blame the persons who made those copies in the days before printing came into use. Well, you won't blame them if you remember this — if the people who lived before the fifteenth century did not take the trouble to write out the works of literature that existed in their time, we should be without nearly all those books which are called classics today. So that we can never be sufficiently grateful to the Catholic Church for what she has done for the world in this matter, for it was the Catholic Church, through the monks of the Middle Ages, who preserved the ancient Greek and Roman classics, as well as the writings of the great doctors of the Church, like Saint Augustine and Saint John Chrysostom, and the book of books, the Bible.

As these books were all written out by hand, and since it is practically impossible to copy out a book without making a slip of some kind, it follows that the oftener copies of a given book were made, the more likely were inaccuracies and mistakes to creep in.

D) Let us suppose, for example, that in the fifth century some industrious monk wrote out a copy of the Iliad of Homer. When he had the work finished, we shall suppose he lent it to some other scribe to make another copy of it. We may be quite sure that when the second writer had completed his task some errors had slipped into his copy. Even today, we often find what are called printer's errors in our printed books, which shows that absolute accuracy is hardly to be expected when a person, even a careful person, is writing out a book, or setting it in type, from another copy. Well, the second scribe, in his turn, lends his book to a third copyist, and this third writer makes his copy, not from the text used by the first scribe, which, for simplicity, we shall suppose to be free from

mistakes, but from a text which contains the inaccuracies of the second writer. The third writer lends his copy to a fourth, the fourth to a fifth, and so on, each copyist inevitably making mistakes of his own, until, as may be easily imagined, quite a number of inaccuracies get into the copies that are in circulation, say, two hundred years after the industrious monk of the fifth century set himself to copy out the Iliad. However, it will be found that the big majority of the mistakes that have got into the text are of no importance, and no one would dream nowadays of doubting the substantial accuracy of the Iliad we possess in spite of all these variant readings. It is substantially the same as when Homer wrote it, some eleven centuries before the birth of Christ. But it shows that the earlier a copy is, the more likely is it to be free from mistakes.

E) We must, therefore, try to find out how old our copies of the Gospels, and those of the early writers who quote the Gospels, are. It is no use to search them to find out the date the copyist put on them, for, unfortunately, he did not put the date on them at all. So we must try to get at it in another way. First, let us note the material of which they are composed. A number of them are written on paper. Now, we know that paper did not come into general use in Europe till the second half of the 14th century. Up to that time, the writing material used was vellum, and before vellum, papyrus was used. Papyrus was used for writing from about the 4th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., and vellum from about the 4th century to the 14th and 15th centuries. So we may take it as generally correct that copies on paper are later than the 14th century, those on vellum are earlier than the 15th century and not earlier than the 4th century, and those on papyrus are not later than the 4th century. Of course, it may easily happen that a copy on paper may be really more correct than one on vellum, for if a scribe of the 15th century were to make a copy of a manuscript of say, the 6th century, it is obvious that his copy, though written on paper, would be likely to be freer from mistakes than one on vellum made from a manuscript of, say, the 10th century.

F) Besides the material on which the copy is written we can learn something about its probable age from the style of writing used. If you look at the documents you will see that some of them are written in ordinary, or, as it is called, cursive writing, that is, capital letters at the beginning of sentences and the rest in small letters, while others are entirely in capital letters. These last are known as uncial manuscripts, and the former as minuscule manuscripts. Uncial letters were used in writing down to about the 9th century, so that we are safe in saying that the uncial manuscripts are earlier than the 10th century. Now, while it is admitted that the Gospels as we have them today in our Catholic Bible are substantially the same as when they were written by Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, yet slight inaccuracies must have crept in when the only way to procure a copy of a book was to write it out by hand. I say "slight" inaccuracies, for though there are a great many variant readings, as they are called, not one of them is of any substantial importance — not a single point of Catholic teaching depends for its proof on any variant reading. Such slight differences are of no importance.

G) Let us suppose, for example, that some catastrophe — the earthquake in San Francisco in 1906, for instance — takes place. It is reported in the papers. Let us read it in half-a-dozen different newspapers, and then count up the "variant readings" — that is, the different words and different way of putting things used by the different reporters. What shall we find? We shall find that there are, perhaps, more than a hundred differences in the way the matter is reported in the different papers, yet the sense is the same in all, and so long as it is reported with substantial accuracy, it does not make the slightest difference how many "variant readings" may be found in the different newspapers. It is exactly the same with the variant readings in the ancient copies of the Gospels.



These variant readings do not make any change in the sense at all, and if we could compare the Gospels as we have them today with the original ones on papyrus, we should find they are all substantially the same. The original papyrus copies have nearly all disappeared. Papyrus was not so strong a writing material as our modern paper, and, therefore, got worn out in a comparatively short time. However, if you go into the British Museum in London you can see a piece of papyrus on which are some verses of Saint John's Gospel (the Rylands papyri); and in Philadelphia there is a papyrus with eighteen verses of Saint Matthew's Gospel. Both of these fragments belong to at least about A.D. 250. {One Rylands Papyrus (P52) has now been dated to at least A.D. 120.}

H) Then there were the Ten Persecutions in the early centuries of the Church when every effort was made by the pagan persecutors to destroy all the copies of the Gospel they could find. However, it is not necessary to possess the original copy of a book to be sure that a copy we happen to have is the same as the original. We have not original copies of the works of Herodotus or Thucydides, for example. Not one of our copies goes back beyond the 10th century A.D. — that is to say, there is a gap of 1,500 years between the time they wrote and the date of the oldest manuscript copy of their works. Yet who doubts about the substantial correctness of the text of their books which we have today? No one. Scholars are well aware that inaccuracies and minor mistakes must have crept into the copies which were made in the days before printing was invented, but they are also well aware that unimportant errors, though they may total many hundreds, and even many thousands, make no real difference so long as the substantial accuracy is preserved. We are infinitely better off in the matter of ancient manuscripts in the case of the Gospels than in the case of the Greek and Latin classics.

I) But perhaps the most important link in the chain connecting our present-day copies of the Gospels with the original ones written by Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the first century A.D. is the Vulgate — Saint Jerome's great revision which he undertook by command of Pope Saint Damasus I (366-384). At that time a number of variant readings had crept into the Gospels in use among the people, and Pope Saint Damasus asked Saint Jerome, who was the greatest biblical scholar of his day — and perhaps of any day — to bring out an edition as free as possible from faulty readings. He was able to make use of Greek manuscripts and ancient versions which have long since disappeared; we shall be able to appreciate the great value of his work if we remember that he was able to use documents going back perhaps to the days of the Apostles themselves. His edition of the New Testament, which was completed in A.D. 385, is thus a most valuable link between our own time and that of the Apostles.

J) Now, let us look at the three groups of documents. The first is composed of Greek manuscripts, the oldest — Codex Vaticanus — going back to the 4th century; the second group is composed of Versions, the oldest being Codex Vercellensis, a Latin translation belonging to the 4th or 5th century; other ancient versions are those in Syriac, the oldest — Sinaitic Syriac (Sir Syn) — belonging to the 5th century; in Coptic, the oldest — the Sahidic fragments — going back to the 5th century, and in Armenian, the oldest dating from 887. (There are others, but these are the principal.) In the third group are the quotations from the Gospels made by the early Christian writers, some of whom (Saint Clement of Rome, for instance) lived in the time of the Apostle Saint John. The Gospels as we have them today come from these three groups of documents. These documents bring us up to the 4th to the 1st centuries. For, consider the documents themselves: Where did they come from? From still earlier copies of the Gospels made in the 3rd, 2nd, and 1st centuries. A number of the early Christian writers who quoted the Gospels lived in the first century — Pope

Saint Clement, for instance, who was martyred about A.D. 97; Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (lived about 50-110); Papias, Bishop of Phrygia (lived about 60-135); Saint Polycarp (lived about 69-155). The Gospels quoted by these Fathers were the Gospels in use in their time — that is, the first, and early part of the second century. So it is quite possible for us to know what the Gospels of the first century were like. Biblical scholars who have studied the matter have shown that our present-day Gospels are substantially the same as those in the first century.

K) The documents in the second group come from translations made at least in the second century, and possibly towards the end of the first century; the Greek manuscripts in the first group come from copies of the Gospels made in the days of the Apostles. Saint Jerome made use of these early copies for his Vulgate version — he told Pope Saint Damasus that he had utilized the ancient manuscripts. They were ancient even in his time! That is why the Vulgate is so valuable; because it enables us to know what, substantially, the Gospel text was in his time and back from his time to the days of the Apostles. So, to put a long story in a few words, we can go back from our own day to the fourth century, from the fourth to the third, from the third to the second, and from the second to the first, and see for ourselves that the Gospels as we have them today are substantially the same as in the days of the Apostles.

Biblical scholars have done that, and are able to affirm that the Gospels have come down to us substantially unchanged. And, after all, how could they have been substantially changed and escape detection? The early heretics made such alterations (see section 13, 'Apocryphal Gospels') but they were speedily denounced. Even in the earliest days of Christianity, the Gospels were read in the assemblies of the faithful, and any attempt to alter the Gospels would have been easily detected by the bishops and the people and could not succeed. And why should the early Christians alter the Gospels? The idea is perfectly absurd. The early Christians had, as was natural, the utmost reverence for the Gospels, and rather than give them up to the pagans, who wanted to stamp out the Christian religion, they laid down their lives in thousands. The early Christians would not alter the Gospels even if they could, and they could not alter them even if they wished to do so. The Gospels, then, have come down to us substantially unchanged.

#### 10. Ancient Manuscripts of the Gospels. -

The oldest one in the world is the Codex Vaticanus (known as Codex B). Footnote: It contains nearly the whole Bible.

It is in the Vatican Library at Rome. It is written in Greek, and is some sixteen hundred years old. I have before me as I am writing a photograph of one of its pages, and every letter stands clearly out, showing the excellence of the ink and vellum used by that pious monk of the fourth-century, and the careful way he wrote it. Evidently, his motto was "nothing but the best," and though it must have meant years of labour — sometimes it took a whole lifetime to copy out a book — he never flagged at his task. It is written in capital letters (down to about the ninth century all books were written in capitals) and there are no divisions between the different words, nor any divisions into chapters and verses. If you live near any big public library, you may be able to see what the Codex Vaticanus is like, for Pope Pius IX had excellent facsimile copies of it made for the chief libraries in Europe. [Today it is possible to access these through the Internet.]

Another very old Bible is the Codex Sinaiticus (Codex Aleph) in the British Museum, London. It was for a long time in the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, where a German scholar named Tischendorf saw it in 1859. At his request, the monks made a present of it to Tsar Alexander

II, who placed it in the Imperial Library, Petrograd. In 1934, it was purchased from the Russian authorities by the British Government for £100,000. The writing is very like that of the Codex Vaticanus, and Tischendorf thought it was the older of the two. Scholars are nowadays generally agreed that the Vaticanus is the older. Like the Vaticanus, it belongs to the fourth century.

The third oldest Bible is the Codex Alexandrinus (Codex A), also in the British Museum, London. It was written in the fifth century, and was given by Cyril Lucar, who had been Patriarch of Alexandria, to King Charles I, of England, in 1628. The writing is somewhat different from that of the other two, and the beginning of new paragraphs is marked by very large capital letters.

Next comes the Codex Ephraem (Codex C), written in the fifth century, and now in the National Library at Paris. I have before me a photograph of one of its pages, and a very extraordinary looking thing it is. Two distinct writings appear on it — one, all in capitals, and the other in cursive or ordinary writing, with capitals only at the beginning of sentences. The older writing looks as if an attempt had been made to erase it, so that the page might be used for the later writing. And this is really what took place. The Codex Ephraem is what is known as a "palimpsest." Palimpsest comes from Greek palimpsestos, "scraped again." In the early centuries, vellum was scarce and dear. The result was that when a person wanted to copy out a book and could not get any new vellum on which to write, he scraped or rubbed off the writing in a book which he did not consider of much importance. As a rule, however, he was content if he obtained a fairly clean surface, so that the original writing was not absolutely rubbed away, traces of it faintly appearing under the new writing. In 1834, a chemical mixture was discovered which had the effect of bringing out, more or less clearly, the traces of the original writing, and in this way, some very old books have been brought to light once more. The Codex Ephraem is one of these. The earlier writing dates from the fifth century. Later on, in the thirteenth century, a monk wished to copy out the works of Saint Ephraem. As he was unable to get a supply of vellum he put his hands on the first book he found, which happened to be a Bible written in the fifth century, and proceeded to rub it out to make room for his favourite author.

Another well-known manuscript is the Codex Bezae (Codex D) in the Cambridge University Library. It was written not later than the sixth century, and some scholars believe it is much earlier even than this. It is in both Greek and Latin, but it contains only the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

In all, some 4,105 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament (167 containing the whole of the New Testament, 1,277 containing the Gospels, the remaining manuscripts containing only parts of the New Testament) have come down to us.

#### 11. Purpose of the Gospels. -

Saint Matthew wrote for Jews, to prove to them that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the Prophets, that His kingdom was a spiritual one, and already set up, and that all men may enter it, and be children of God, who is man's heavenly Father. Saint Mark wrote for Christians living in Rome, that they might have a permanent record of Saint Peter's preaching showing that Our Lord proved Himself the Son of God by His miracles. Saint Luke wrote to strengthen his friend Theophilus — and all those converts like him — in the faith; and Saint John tells us that he wrote his Gospel "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God: and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:31) — that is, his purpose was to refute certain heretics who,

towards the end of the first century, denied the divinity of Our Lord, and to help the Christians of his time to understand more fully the sublime teaching of Jesus Christ.

## 12. The Synoptic Problem. -

The Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as "synoptic" Gospels (from Greek synopsis, "that which is taken in at a glance"), because having much in common, they can be arranged in parallel columns, their resemblances and differences being thus readily perceived. Thus, though not everything Our Lord did or said is in the Gospels (Saint John tells us that "there are also many other things which Jesus did: which if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written," — 21:25; and see John 20:30), and each writer had therefore a wide field from which to select his material, yet Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke select, as a rule, the same events and discourses; the very words and expressions are often strikingly similar; they follow the same general plan, which is, in outline, the preaching of Saint John the Baptist, the baptism and temptation of Our Lord, His ministry in Galilee, His journey to Jerusalem for the last Pasch of His earthly life, His passion, death, and resurrection. (Saint John wrote many years after the other Evangelists. As they had written mainly of Our Lord's ministry in Galilee, Saint John, to complete them, confined himself chiefly to the ministry in Judea and Jerusalem.)

Yet there are differences no less striking. There is nothing in Saint Matthew, for example, about the good thief; nor in Saint Mark about Our Lord's infancy or early life; nor in Saint Luke about Our Lord's walking on the sea. Furthermore, even the same events are sometimes put in a different chronological order: thus, Saint Matthew places the healing of Peter's mother-in-law after the Sermon on the Mount, while Saint Luke places it before that sermon. For many years, scholars have tried to find out the relationship between these three Gospels, and to account for these various similarities and differences, but so far no definite solution of the "Synoptic Problem," as it is called, has been found.

Broadly speaking the attempts at solution run along three lines: (1) the second of the three writers made use of the first, the third made use of the first and second, each — that is, the second and third — using also matter derived elsewhere; (2) each of the three made use chiefly of earlier writings which recorded, in more or less detail, works and words of Our Lord; (3) each depended principally on the details of Our Lord's life and teaching as given in the preaching of the Apostles and disciples. (By force of circumstances, instead of everything that Our Lord did and said being preached in turn, certain incidents were dwelt on more frequently, and thus came to form the substance of the Apostolic preaching.) That preaching was not absolutely fixed, however; various details were added according as it was addressed to Jews or pagans. This oral tradition (as it is called) was thus at once both the same — as regards its main points — and different — as regards various details. Possibly the similarities and differences between the synoptic Gospels may be due to their having been written from this oral tradition. It is more likely, however, that these similarities and differences are due to their having been written partly from this oral tradition and partly from earlier writings — in other words the most likely solution of the "Synoptic Problem," seems to lie in a combination of (2) and (3).

## 13. Apocryphal Gospels. -

A) The word "apocryphal" comes from Greek apokruphos, meaning "hidden," "obscure"; and by "apocryphal gospels" are meant certain writings of the 2nd to 5th centuries which claimed to be

inspired, but which were not recognised as such by the Church, and were therefore not on the "canon" or list of books officially recognised as part of the Sacred Scriptures. Though a book may not be on the "canon" — and be called, therefore, "apocryphal" — it does not necessarily follow that it is a bad, or even an unreliable book — all that follows is that the Church does not teach that such a book is inspired. Thus, in the Vulgate — that is, the official Catholic Bible — there are three writings given in an appendix at the end: they are the Prayer of Manasses, and the Third and Fourth Books of Esdras. These are not on the canon — they are carefully kept apart from the canonical books — and are consequently "apocryphal"; but they are admittedly pious and edifying books.

So are some of the apocryphal gospels: they were written with a good intention, in order to supply details concerning Our Lord and His Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph not given in the gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Church, however, never looks on such works with favour — her attitude towards the marvellous is that of wise caution, as was shown, for instance, in the case of the alleged apparition of the Blessed Virgin at Marpingen in 1876, and that of the alleged revelations of the Sacred Heart to Claire Ferchaud during the European War of 1914-1918 — and most of these details are improbable in the extreme; yet they cannot be called bad, at least in the full sense of the word; some of them are probably quite true, and even down to our own day have contributed not a little to piety — the detail, for example, represented in every crib of an ox and an ass being in the stable at the birth of Our Lord, which is recorded, not in any of the canonical gospels, but in the apocryphal Pseudo-Matthew, a gospel alleged to have been written by Saint Matthew, but in reality a production of the fourth or fifth century. (See Point 'C', number '1', below). The point bears repeating: The Church's attitude towards the marvellous is that of wise caution and even with approved apparitions, such as Knock in 1879, the Church is always slow and cautious in lending its imprimatur on extra-ordinary events. The Church was extremely cautious in evaluating any document purporting to come from Apostolic times.

Not all the apocryphal gospels, however, are as harmless as these supplementary ones; a number of them are wolves in sheep's clothing — books written by heretics, in which Our Lord was made to say things in favour of their false doctrines (which He could never have said), and which were in most cases put forth as having been written by one or other of the Apostles, in the hope that they might thereby find a footing among the faithful. Such books were bad books in the full sense of the word.

We have thus two distinct classes of apocryphal gospels which obviously stand on very different levels, and must be kept clearly apart. Not all of the apocryphal gospels have come down to us. It's a long way back to the first five centuries of the Christian era and a great many things have happened since then — wars have taken place, libraries have been destroyed, and many other destructive factors have been at work — and the result has been that in a number of cases all we know about these gospels is their name; not a line of them can be recovered; in a number of others all that has been saved from the wreck of time are a few fragments scattered here and there as quotations in the works of writers of the early centuries of the Church; in six cases only has the text of an apocryphal gospel, substantially as it was written, come down to us.

B) The following list is fairly complete:

More, or less, heretical versions:

1. Gospel according to the Hebrews. - The earliest in date: written probably about A.D. 100. Only some 20 fragments, of unequal length, have come down. One has a Saying attributed to Our Lord

not found in the New Testament: "Rejoice only when you look upon your brother with charity" — very probably genuine. Describing the baptism of Our Lord, the Holy Spirit is recorded as saying: "My Son, I awaited You in all the prophets, I awaited that You should come, so that I might rest in You." It was the only gospel used by the first Christian heretics, the Judaizers.

2. Gospel according to Peter. - Written either about 110-130 or 150-170. Beyond the fact that Serapion, who was Bishop of Antioch from 190 to about 210, had condemned this gospel as heretical, practically nothing was known about it till 1886-7, when M. Bouriant discovered nine pages of it (about 150 lines) during excavations at Akhmin (the ancient Panopolis), Egypt. This fragment contains the end of the history of the Passion, and an account of the Resurrection. According to this gospel when Pilate, who was convinced of the innocence of Jesus, found he could not save Him, he handed Him over to Herod, who had Him crucified immediately.

3. Gospel according to the Egyptians. - Dates from about 140-150. Only some fragments have survived. A number of scholars think that the fragments of gospels discovered in 1877 on the site of Arsinoe, in the Fayum, and at Behesa (the ancient Oxyrhynchus), Egypt, in 1896-1897 and 1903-1906, belong to this gospel.

4. Gospel of Marcion. - Marcion was a celebrated heretic and founded his sect, the Marcionites, in 144. He rejected the canonical gospels except that of Saint Luke, which he altered to suit his heretical views. (The Marcionites paved the way for Manichaeism — the heresy into which Saint Augustine, as a young man, fell in 373. He was not won to the Church until 387, when he was baptized in Milan by Saint Ambrose.)

5. Gospel of the Twelve Apostles. - Written towards the end of the second century. Only fragments remain which show that it was very probably copied from Saint Matthew's gospel, with alterations to fit in with heresy.

6. Gospel of Philip. - Belongs to the same period. Was used by certain Egyptian heretics. Only some fragments have come down.

7. Gospel of Thomas. - About same period. Fragments, showing that it was heretical, remain. Was revised about the end of the fourth, or beginning of the fifth century by some unknown Christian who cleansed it of its errors. The corrected version has come down and is known as the gospel of Thomas the Israelite Philosopher (see Point 'C', number '3', below).

The following ten apocryphal gospels are lost; all we know about them is their names, and that they were in circulation among heretical sects between 150 and 200: Gospels of Cerinthus, of Basilides, of Apelles, of Valentin (these were celebrated heretics of the 2nd century); of Andrew, of Bartholomew, of Thaddaeus, of Judas Iscariot, of Matthias, and of Barnabas (names of some of the Apostles: used by heretics as "camouflage" for the speedier spreading of their false teaching). All the gospels mentioned so far were more or less heretical.

C) The following gospels were written by Christians: they are largely legendary, but free from heresy. Their text has come down to us.

1. The Protevangel of James, or History of James concerning the Birth of Mary. Adaptations of this gospel are: the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, and the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary.

2. History of Joseph the Carpenter.

3. Gospel of Thomas the Israelite Philosopher (see Point 'B', number '7', above).

4. Arab Gospel of the Infancy.

5. Gospel of Nicodemus.

6. The Transitus (or Death) of Mary.

These six belong to the 3rd to 5th century. But, as I have said, the Church never recognised any of these so-called gospels — she recognised four, and only four, those written by Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

D) To sum up, the four Gospels, considered simply and solely as books of history, are absolutely trustworthy, and can be unhesitatingly believed, because their writers were well-informed on the matters about which they wrote, and they set down things as they really took place; and because the Gospels have come down to us substantially as they were written.

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