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# THE GOSPELS

## AS BOOKS OF HISTORY

By  
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# THE GOSPELS AS BOOKS OF HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

BY REV. C. C. O'CONNOR.

## 1. Name

“GOSPEL” comes from Anglo-Saxon “god-spell” meaning “good tidings,” “good news”; “god-spell” is a translation of Greek *euaggelion*. Greek was the language chiefly spoken by the early Christians (Pope St. Victor I., 189-198, was the first to write in Latin); that is why the Gospels (except the Gospel of St. Matthew) as well as the rest of the books of the New Testament, were written in Greek. St. 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 St. 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 St. Matthew’s Gospel, made by early ecclesiastical writers whose works have come down to us, are taken. The word *euaggelion* 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

<sup>1</sup>From the “Simple Course of Catholic Teaching” in the *Irish Catholic*.

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to mankind. Thus, an inscription of about the year B. C. 9—found towards the end of the nineteenth 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 *euaggelion* (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 SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, these books came themselves to be known as “gospels.” St. 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. St. 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 SS. 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 IV.). 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 shall 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. Is it a true and reliable history? If its author was well acquainted with the facts of that reign, was not mistaken about any of them, and set them down, without fear or favor, as they really happened, then, obviously, it is a true and reliable history. Now, let us suppose that it obtains a very wide circulation, and that in, say, 2,000 years’ time—if the world will last so long—it is still being printed and read. We who lived in King Edward’s reign knew that it was a reliable history, for we knew what took place and we could test its value by our own knowledge of the facts; but how could those living in A. D. 4,000, say, know that it was trustworthy? Some of the most reliable books of history in the world are very old—much older than the Gospels. The authoritative account of the great Persian invasion of Greece, for instance, 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. Therefore there must be some means of telling whether a book of history, written long before anyone now alive was born, is reliable or not.

Briefly, we can be sure that a book of history is trustworthy if we can be sure that the author was a well-informed and honest writer—one who was in a position to know what he was writing about, and who stated the facts as they really occurred—and that his book has come down to us without any substantial alteration. If it had been altered in any important way in the course of time, that would be enough to put it out of court altogether as a work of reliable history. If it were still the same, however, as when it was first composed, then it is obvious that it would make no difference at all how old it was, nor would it make any difference if our copies were only a translation—provided, of course, that the translation was a good one and faithfully expressed the sense of the original. We shall see that the writers of the Gospels were well-informed and sincere; that they could not possibly have been deceived as to the facts of Our Lord's life and teaching; that they had no wish to deceive anyone, but simply to state the truth and nothing but the truth; and that the Gospels themselves have come down to us substantially the same as they were written by SS. 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 St. Matthew . . . according to St. Mark . . . according to St. Luke . . . according to St. John." You notice that it is said: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, *according to* etc., for there is but one gospel (*euaggelion*, "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 *euaggelistes*, 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 second century everyone acknowledged SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the authors. Thus (to mention only a very few) St. 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, a 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." St. Irenaeus's words are of exceptional weight in the matter, because he had as master in his younger days St. Polycarp (69-155), who had been a disciple of St. 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 SS. 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; Titian's *Diatessaron* (a "Harmony of the Four Gospels") composed, about the same year; the Titles ("according to Matthew . . . Mark . . . Luke . . . John") prefixed to the Gospels, probably between 100 and 150; St. Polycarp (wrote about 112-118); St. Ignatius (wrote about 107)—all these (and there are many more) bear witness to the fact that SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were the authors of the Gospels. These writers were not, of course, the first to believe that SS. 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. St. 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 SS. 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 SS. 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. We know that 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. (*cf.* St. Matthew xiii. 36; St. Mark iv. 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 St. Mark. Who was St. Mark? He was the disciple and companion—nowadays we would call him “secretary”—of St. Peter, the Chief of the Apostles. St. 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 ap-

proved 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." Papias was one of the "Apostolic Fathers"—that is, he was personally acquainted with at least one—possibly more—of the twelve Apostles. (He lived probably about A. D. 60-135.) 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 St. Luke. Who was St. Luke? The disciple and companion—"secretary"—of St. Paul. St. Paul was miraculously converted on his way to Damascus by Our Lord Himself. Who taught him many things (Galatians i. 12); furthermore, after his conversion he visited St. Peter and others of the Apostles, so that he knew exactly all about Our Lord. St. Luke was taught by St. Paul—he was with him for years—and could not, therefore, be mistaken in what he states in his Gospel. It is beyond doubt, therefore, that SS. 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. Yet it is plain facts such as these that the Evangelists record, and it was by working such miracles—miracles which were so plain and striking that no one could possibly be mistaken about them—that Christ proved that He was really the Son of God. In a word, the writers of the Gospels knew Our Lord too well to make any mistake about Him.

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

It is obvious that the writers of the Gospels did not wish to deceive: their aim was to state the truth, and nothing but the truth. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that they deliberately put in a pretended miracle of Our Lord. What had they to gain by doing so? Nothing whatever; on the contrary they had everything to lose. 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 wanted to say what was untrue, a moment's reflection will show us that they could not possibly have done so. There were more people than the writers of the Gospels alive when Our Lord was on earth. There were the Jews and the pagans of the Roman Empire. Both were deadly opposed to Christianity, and they would have at once shown up any mistakes or lies in the Gospels, if there were any in them. For instance, Christ raised the widow's son to life just outside the city of Naim. If that were untrue the Jews living in Naim would have shown up the untruth. They did not do so, simply because they could not do so. 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 absolutely certain therefore, 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 the Ninth 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 be-

fore the European War. Putting these two things together we see that it must have been written between the years 1871 and 1919. In the same way we can tell that Dickens wrote "Nicholas Nickleby" before there were trains from London to Yorkshire, for Nicholas went to Dotheboys Hall by stage coach. Now in the year 70 A. D. a remarkable event took place in the Holy Land which completely swept away the order of things as they had been since 63 B. C., when the country became subject to the Romans. This was the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. History has nothing to show which produced so profound a change in so short a time, with the possible exception of the Great War, from the effects of which the world is still suffering. Jerusalem was razed to the ground, and if the figures given by the celebrated Jewish historian, Josephus, are correct, eleven hundred thousand Jews succumbed during the siege, which lasted less than seven months, and ninety-seven thousand were taken prisoners. Now let us examine the Gospels. Not a word about this profound change. The Palestine described in the Gospels is the Palestine that existed before the fall of Jerusalem—the Palestine of the Temple in the full splendor of its glory, of the Sanhedrin, of the Herodians and of the Scribes and Pharisees. Obviously the writers of the Gospels lived in the Holy Land before the year 70. And now here is something more remarkable still. The first three Gospels give Our Lord's prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem. (St. John expressly states in his Gospel that he recorded only a part of what Our Lord did and spoke: as the other Evangelists

gave that prophecy, St. John omitted it.) But they do not say a word about its having taken place. Hence they must have written before 70. Had they written after 70 they could have pointed triumphantly to the prophecy and its fulfilment, and it is easy to see that it would have been a very striking argument in favor of Our Lord's prophetic power and would have made many converts. But just as a person who would write of Alsace-Lorraine as "a German imperial territory" must have written before the war of 1914-1918, so the first three Gospels which speak of things in the Holy Land as they existed before the fall of Jerusalem must have been written before the year 70. (St. John wrote his Gospel towards the end of his long life in order to refute some heretical sects that had sprung up in Asia where he was then living.) Similarly it can be shown that the first three Gospels were not written before Our Lord's Ascension, for they describe His Ascension. Can we get anything more precise than between the Ascension of Our Lord and the fall of Jerusalem as the period in which the first three Gospels were written? Perhaps we shall not be far wrong if we place St. Matthew's Gospel—the Aramaic original text—about 55-63, and the Greek translation of St. Matthew's Gospel about 57-67; St. Mark's Gospel about 60-65; St. Luke's Gospel about 62-65, and St. John's Gospel about 85-97.

### *9. Gospels Substantially Unchanged*

Can we be sure that the Gospels as we find them in the New Testament today are the same as when

they were written in the first century of the Christian era?

We can print any number of copies of a book and be certain that they will all be the same. But printing came into use only in the fifteenth 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 passage or two 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 manuscripts 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 manuscripts and, therefore, unlikely to be correct; and they paid particular attention to the age of the manuscripts, for generally speaking the older a manuscript the more likely was it to be correct. Then they put them into three groups—they put all the Greek ones together, then all the translations in all other languages together, and then all the other writings—works of ecclesiastical writers who quoted the Gospels—together. It is easy to see why they did this. The Greek manuscripts were



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copies taken directly from the text of the Gospels in the language in which they were originally written—St. Matthew, as we saw, wrote originally in Aramaic, but at a very early date his Gospel was translated into Greek, and it is this Greek edition which has come down to us, the Aramaic one having been lost; the manuscripts in other languages were translations from the Greek, and if doubts existed as to the true reading of a passage as recorded in the Greek manuscripts very often these doubts could be set aside by comparing the readings in the translations. So with the manuscripts of the ecclesiastical writers who quoted the Gospels. Sometimes it would be impossible to decide, either from the Greek manuscripts or the translations, which was the correct reading. Then the passage would be looked up in the quotations made by the ecclesiastical writers, and in that way there was a likelihood of the true reading being established. The next point was to classify these various manuscripts according to their ages, for, as we said, the earlier the manuscript the more likely was it to be correct. A manuscript literally means a “document written by hand,” but though every letter we write to our friends is a manuscript in this general sense, the word is restricted to the books that were written before the invention of printing. Until that time every copy had to be written out by hand; and 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 grate-

ful 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 St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom, and the book of books, the Bible. A manuscript, then, means a book written before printing was invented. Since they were all written out by hand, and since it is practically impossible to copy out even a page 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.

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 out of the question when a person, even a very careful person, is writing out, or setting 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 multitude 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 vast 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 manuscript is the more likely it is to be free from mistakes. We must, therefore, try to find out how old our manuscripts of the Gospels, and the manuscripts 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 the manuscripts 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 fourteenth 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 fourth century B. C. to the fourth century A. D., and vellum from about the fourth century to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. So we may take it as generally correct that manuscripts on paper are later than the fourteenth century, those on vellum are earlier than

the fifteenth century and later than the fourth century, and those on papyrus are earlier than the fourth century. Of course, it may easily happen that a manuscript on paper may be really more correct than a manuscript on vellum, for if a scribe of the fifteenth century were to make a copy of a manuscript of say, the sixth century, it is obvious that his manuscript, though written on paper, would be likely to be freer from mistakes than a copy on vellum made from a manuscript of, say, the tenth century.

Besides the material on which the manuscript is written we can learn something about its probable age from the style of writing used. If you look at the manuscripts 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 manuscripts down to about the ninth century, so that we are safe in saying that the uncial manuscripts are earlier than the tenth century. Well, though the Gospels which we have today in our Catholic Bible are substantially the same as when they were written by SS. 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 dif-

ferences are of no importance. Let us suppose, for example, that some statesman—the President of the United States, shall we say?—makes an important speech on American policy. The speech is reported in the newspapers. 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 probably a hundred differences in the way the speech is reported in the different papers, yet the sense is the same in all, and so long as the speech 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 manuscripts 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 all disappeared. Papyrus was not so strong a writing material as our modern paper, and, therefore, got worn out in a comparatively short time. 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 Heroditus or Thucydides, for example. Not

one of our copies goes back beyond the tenth 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.

Now, let us consider the three groups of manuscripts. Some are in Greek, the oldest—Codex Vaticanus—going back to the fourth century; some in Latin, the oldest—Codex Vercellensis—belonging to fourth or fifth century; some in Syriac, the oldest—Sinaitic Syriac (SyrSin)—belonging to fifth century; some in Coptic, the oldest—the Sahidic fragments—going back to the fifth century; and some in Armenian, the oldest dating from 887. When the Gospels as we have them today were compared with these ancient manuscripts they were found to be substantially the same. But these ancient manuscripts can be traced back through the preceding centuries, for they themselves came from much earlier manuscripts which have disappeared, but whose existence is certain. Thus, Coptic versions were made towards

the end of the second century; Syriac and Latin versions go back to about the middle of the second century; while copies in Greek existed from the first century. These various copies were substantially the same: a Copt, for instance, who knew Syriac, Latin, and Greek would see that the Gospels were substantially the same though written in different languages. Further, these first and second century Gospels were substantially the same as those in the fourth and fifth century manuscripts—these latter mainly come from those of the first and second century ones. Now, these fourth and fifth century manuscripts can be seen at the present day, so that we can compare our Gospels with them. That has been done, and they are substantially the same. We can thus trace our Gospels back, step by step, to the fifth and fourth centuries, then on to the second and first. The only point remaining is: Could the Gospels have been tampered with and substantially altered at the end of the first or in the early part of the second century? No. And why not? Because there were plenty of people still alive who knew the Apostle St. John, who had been taught by him—for instance Papias, Bishop of Phrygia, in Asia Minor, lived about A. D. 60-135; St. Polycarp about 69-155—who knew perfectly what was in the Gospels, and who would have immediately drawn attention to any attempt to change them. Furthermore, we know from the writings of St. Justin, a pagan philosopher, who became a Christian in the year 130, that in his time the Gospels were read every Sunday at Mass. Therefore, any attempt to alter the original text of the Gospels would have been

detected by the faithful and could not succeed. And why should the Christians of the first century 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. This is evident, not only from common sense, but from the third group of manuscripts. These manuscripts are full of quotations from the Gospels, and some of them go back to the first century—for instance the Epistle of St. Clement, written about 93-97; the Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, the first part of which was very probably written before 90; and the Epistle of Barnabas, which almost certainly dates from 70-79. So we can trace back the Gospels from the fourth century to the middle of the second and on to the first century, and prove for ourselves that they are substantially the same today as when they were written by SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

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

The oldest one in the world is the Codex Vaticanus (known as Codex B).<sup>2</sup> It is in the Vatican Library at Rome. It is written in Greek, and is over fifteen hundred years old. I have before me as I am writing a photograph of one of its pages, and every letter

<sup>2</sup>Contains nearly the whole Bible.



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 labor—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. We would find it very hard to read a book now if all the words ran into one another, but that is because we are so used to seeing the words separate. The people who lived long ago were able to read their books without any great difficulty. 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.

Another very old Bible is the Codex Sinaiticus (Codex Aleph) in the Imperial Library at Petrograd. It was originally in the Monastery of St. 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. It is now—or was up to the Russian revolution—in the Imperial Library, Petrograd. The writing is very like that of the Codex Vaticanus, and Tischendorf thought it was the older of the two. Scholars are pretty generally agreed nowadays, however, from a comparison of the writing, 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) 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 St. 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 favorite 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 4,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have been collected up to the present.

### *11. Purpose of the Gospels*

St. 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. St. Mark wrote for Christians living in Rome, that they might have a permanent record of St. Peter's preaching showing that Our Lord proved Himself the Son of God by His miracles. St. Luke wrote to strengthen his friend Theophilus—and all those converts like him—in the faith; and St. John wrote to prove the Divinity of Jesus Christ.

## 12. *The Synoptic Problem*

The Gospels of SS. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as "synoptic" Gospels (from Greek *sunopsis*, "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 (St. 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,"—xxi. 25; *cf. ibid.* xx. 30), and each writer had therefore a wide field from which to select his material, yet SS. 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 St. 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. (St. John wrote many years after the other Evangelists. As they had written mainly of Our Lord's ministry in Galilee, St. 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 St. Matthew, for example, about the Ascension; nor in St. Mark about Our Lord's infancy or early life; nor in St. Luke about Our Lord's walking on the sea. Furthermore even the same events are sometimes put in a different chronological order: thus, St. Matthew places the

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healing of Peter's mother-in-law after the Sermon on the Mount, while St. 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 solu-

tion of the "Synoptic Problem" seems to lie in a combination of (2) and (3).

### *13. Apocryphal Gospels*

The word "apocryphal" comes from Greek *apokruphos*, meaning "hidden," "obscure"; and by "apocryphal gospels" are meant certain writings of the second to fifth centuries which claimed to be inspired, but which were not recognized as such by the Church, and were therefore not on the "canon" or list of books officially recognized 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 St. Joseph, not given in the gospels of SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Church, however, never looks on such works with favor—her attitude towards the marvelous is that of wise caution, as was shown, for instance, in the case of the alleged apparition of the Blessed Virgin at Knock in 1879, and that

of the alleged revelations of the Sacred Heart to Claire Ferchaud during the European War—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 St. Matthew, but in reality a production of the fourth or fifth century.

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 favor 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.

The following list is fairly complete:

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. Has a saying attributed to Our Lord not found in the New Testament: "Rejoice only when you look upon your brother with charity," which may well be genuine. Describing the baptism of Our Lord, the Holy Spirit is recorded as saying: "My Son, I awaited Thee in all the prophets, I awaited that Thou shouldst come, so that I might rest in Thee." 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 St. Luke, which he altered to suit his heretical views. (The Marcionites paved the way for Manichaeism—the heresy into which St. Augustine, “the child of many tears,” fell in 373. He was not won to the Church until, in 383, he came under the influence of St. Ambrose at Milan.)

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 St. 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.

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 second century); of *Andrew, of Bartholomew, of Thaddæus, of Judas Iscariot, of Matthias, and of Barnabas* (these were apostles whose names were used by heretics as “camouflage” for the speedier spreading of their false teaching). All the gospels mentioned so far were more or less heretical.

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 7 above). 4—*Arab Gospel of the Infancy*. 5—*Gospel of Nicodemus*. 6—*The Transitus (or Death) of Mary*. These six belong to the third-fifth century. But, as I have said, the Church never recognized any of these so-called gospels—she recognized four, and only four, those written by SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

To sum up, the four Gospels, considered simply and solely as books of history, and as if they were not inspired at all, are absolutely trustworthy, and can be unhesitatingly believed, because their writers were well-informed and set down things as they really took place; and because the Gospels have come down to us substantially as they were written.



