

GOD, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE CHURCH

Apologetics for High School



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CHAPTER II Sources of Our Knowledge of Christ and His Teaching

A. Non-Christian Sources

History knows only *one* Teacher of the Christian Faith and Founder of the Christian Church: *Jesus of Nazareth*, who was born in Bethlehem during the reign of the Emperor Augustus and was crucified about 33 years later under the Emperor Tiberius. Less than a hundred years after His death and resurrection the spiritual kingdom which He founded was spread all over the then known world.

1. We can easily see why the non-Christian contemporaries of the first Christians had very little to say about Christ and Christianity. Both Jews and pagans despised a religion whose founder had died the shameful death of the cross. Such a religion was, in the words of its greatest preacher, “unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness.” Still both Jewish and pagan writers have recorded enough to prove the absurdity of the claim set up in recent times by certain enemies of the Christian religion, that Christ was a mere myth, not an historical personage.

2. **Tacitus**, the greatest of the Roman historians, bears clearest testimony (1) to the founding of Christianity by Christ; (2) to the death of Christ under Pontius Pilate; (3) to the rapid spread of Christianity and the attempt of Nero to extirpate it.

“Nero,” he writes, “to put an end to the common talk that Rome had been set on fire by his order, imputed it to others, visiting with a refinement of punishment those detestable criminals who went by the name of Christians. *The author of that denomination was Christ, who had been executed in Tiberius’s time by the Procurator Pontius Pilate.* The pestilent superstition, checked for a while, burst out again, not only throughout Judea . . . but throughout the city of Rome also” (*Annal.* XV, 44).

3. **Pliny the Younger**, sent in A.D. 111 by the Emperor Trajan as Propraetor into Bithynia, is startled and perplexed, as he tells the Emperor, by the number, influence, and pertinacity of the Christians whom he finds there and in the neighboring province of Pontus. The temples of the gods were almost forsaken and purchasers of victims for the sacrifices were most rare to find. Curious to know something more definite about the Christians, he is informed that nothing can compel a real Christian to invoke the gods or to offer wine and incense to the Emperor’s image. The whole of their crime was that “they were accustomed to assemble on a stated day before dawn and to *sing together a hymn to Christ as God*, and to bind themselves by an oath, not to any crime, but on

the contrary to keep from theft, robbery, breach of promise, and appropriating deposits” (*Ep. 97*).

4. **Suetonius**, the biographer of the Caesars, regarded the Christians as a Jewish sect. Speaking of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome under the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 51 or 52), he says they were driven out “because they were making continual disturbances under the *instigation of Christus*.” Evidently Suetonius believed that Christ was in Rome under the Emperor Claudius. His mention of Christ may have reference to differences between Jews and Christians.

5. **The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus** (A.D. 37-100) speaks of Christ in two places of his *Jewish Antiquities*. In Book XVIII, 3:2, he writes:

“At this time appeared Jesus, a wise man, if it be right to call him a man, for he worked miracles. He was the teacher of men who received the truth with joy, and He drew after Him many Jews and many Greeks. He was the Christ. On the denunciation of the first men of our nation, Pilate condemned Him to the cross; but those who loved Him from the beginning did not cease to love Him. For

He appeared to them risen on the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold concerning Him, as also a thousand other marvels about Him. The sect which receives from Him the name of Christians exists even to this day.”

There is also a brief mention of Christ in Book XX, 9:1:

“Ananus (A.D. 62) summoned the Great Council and set before it James, the brother of *Jesus who is called the Christ*, and some others, and had them condemned to be stoned to death.”

6. **The Talmud** contains twelve references to Christ. All of them are filled with hatred of the very name of Jesus. Christ’s miracles are not denied but ascribed to magical arts which He had brought from Egypt. His death by crucifixion is placed “on the eve of the Feast of the Passover.”

7. In a letter of exhortation addressed by a certain Syrian named **Mara** to his son Serapion (between A.D. 73 and 160) Christ is called the “wise king of the Jews” who was murdered by His own people. “What did it profit the Jews,” asks Mara, “to put their wise king to death, seeing that from that time on the kingdom was taken from them?”

B. Christian Sources

1. The Epistles of St. Paul and the Other Apostles

As Christian sources of our knowledge of Christ and His teaching we have, first of all, the **Epistles of St. Paul**.

1. Very few Biblical scholars even of the extreme Rationalist school question the historical character of the principal Epistles of St. Paul. Harnack and Juelicher, the acknowledged leaders among the modern Rationalists, admit without hesitation that the Epistles to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, and Philippians were written by St. Paul about A.D. 49-59 or A.D. 53-64.

2. It is a disputed question whether St. Paul knew Jesus personally. At all events the details of His life were well known to him. He reminds the Galatians (3:1) that he had “set forth before their eyes Jesus Christ Crucified.” He was acquainted with the particulars of the passion and death of Christ (*I Cor. 11*). He speaks of His birth, of His descent from David, of His absolute sinlessness, of His unselfishness and obedience unto death. The Resurrection is the central theme of his preaching. He even mentions several apparitions of the risen Lord which are not recorded in the

Gospels. His whole life was patterned on that of Christ, and he could say to the faithful: “Be ye followers of me, as I am of Christ.”

3. **The Epistles written by the other Apostles** contain very few direct references to the life of Christ. *St. Peter*

mentions the death of Christ, His descent into Limbo, His resurrection, ascension, and promised second coming (*I Pet. 3:18-22*). Like St. Paul he exhorts the faithful to follow in the footsteps of Christ (*I Pet. 2:21*).

In his *First Epistle*, *St. John* speaks of his personal experience of the Incarnate Word: “That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, in regard of the Word of Life . . . we declare to you also, in order that you may have fellowship with us” (*I John 1:1-4*).

All the Epistles presuppose that those to whom they are addressed already possessed a thorough knowledge of the life and teaching of Christ.

2. The Four Gospels

The most important sources of our knowledge of the teaching and history of Christ are the Four Gospels. To



Saint Paul
Antonio del Castillo y Saavedra

prove the existence of Christian Revelation, it is sufficient to prove the historical authority of the Gospels.

There are three tests by which the historical authority of a work can be established: its genuineness, its integrity, and its veracity; in other words, if it be the work of the author to whom it is ascribed; if the text be substantially as it left the author's hand; if it be shown that the author himself was well-informed and truthful.

The Gospels of Sts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John satisfy these three tests, and we can therefore accept them unhesitatingly as historical; i.e., as faithful narratives of past events.

The word *Gospel* means glad tidings or good news concerning Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation. "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in the Synagogues, and preaching the *Gospel* of the Kingdom" (*Matt. 4:23*). Hence the word was very properly applied to the history of the life and teachings of Christ. The writers of the Gospels are called Evangelists, from the Greek word for good news—*euangelion*. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, as distinguished from the Fourth, because of their many agreements in matter, arrangement, and language (Greek, *sunopsis*, presenting or taking a common view of anything). The problem as to the origin and the relations of the Synoptic Gospels presented by their resemblances, is known as the *Synoptic Problem*.

A) THE GOSPELS ARE GENUINE

The genuineness (as well as the integrity and historical trustworthiness) of a work may be proved by *extrinsic arguments*—that is, by the testimony of writers who lived about the same time—or by *intrinsic arguments* drawn from the style and contents of the book itself.

Extrinsic arguments give us historical certitude of the genuineness of a book, if it is clear that the witnesses are trustworthy, and that their testimony has not been falsified.

Intrinsic arguments do not, in many cases, sufficiently determine the author and the exact time of composition. They are very useful, however, as confirmations of the external proofs.

I. Extrinsic Arguments

1. Our four Gospels existed in the earliest days of the Church.—

a) The *Didache*, (i.e., the Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles, written between A.D. 80 and 100) quotes passages from Matthew and Luke. The Our Father, which is cited according to the text of St. Matthew, is introduced with the words: "As the Lord commands in His Gospels."

b) The *Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* (about A.D. 96) contains ten texts taken from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

c) The *Epistle attributed to St. Barnabas* (about A.D.



Ss. John, Peter, Mark, and Paul
Albrecht Dürer

100- 130) contains many allusions to Matthew and several to Mark and Luke.

d) *St. Ignatius of Antioch* (martyred A.D. 107) quotes Matthew, Luke and John in his seven Epistles. Thus we see that about the year 100 the first three Gospels were in existence; shortly afterwards the Fourth Gospel is also known.

e) The *Heretics* of the earliest times were well acquainted with our Gospels. In the first half of the second century the Gnostics made use of them. *Marcion* (about A.D. 140), whom Justin and Tertullian regarded as the most dangerous of all heretics, built up his new sect on the Gospel of St. Luke and the Epistles of St. Paul; but he also made use of Matthew and John.

2. The authors of the Gospels are Apostles and Disciples of the Apostles.—

When there was question of choosing a successor to Judas, all agreed with St. Peter that he must be one who had been with Jesus "from the Baptism of John until the Ascension," because only such a man could be a trustworthy witness of the life of Christ. The early Church was equally strict in her demands in regard to her sacred books. They were regarded as trustworthy only if they were written directly or indirectly by Apostles. Besides the carefully guarded tradition of the Church we have the direct testimony of ecclesiastical writers of the earliest times that our Gospels were really the work of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; that is, of two Apostles and two companions and disciples of Apostles.

a) *Papias*, Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia (about A.D. 130), who was a disciple of St. John, friend of St. Polycarp, and master of St. Irenaeus, mentions the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark:

“*Mark* neither heard the Lord nor followed Him; but subsequently, as I said, attached himself to Peter, who used to frame his teaching to meet the immediate wants of his hearers, and not as making a connected narrative of the Lord’s discourses . . .

“*Matthew* wrote the *logia* (i.e., a record of the words and works of Our Lord) in the Hebrew language, and they translated them to the best of their ability.”

b) *St. Justin Martyr* (about A.D. 150) narrates that the Gospels were read at the meetings of the Christians. In another place he says that the Gospels were written by Apostles and disciples. He quotes about twenty verses from the Sermon on the Mount, refers to Messianic prophecies contained in the Gospel of St. Matthew, and describes the Annunciation and many incidents of the birth of Christ found in St. Luke.

c) Within twenty years of the death of Justin, *Tatian*, who had been a pupil of Justin, produced a continuous narration of the Gospel-history which received the name *Diatesseron* (“through four”). It is in the main a compilation from our four Gospels.

d) *St. Irenaeus* (about A.D. 180), a friend of St. Polycarp, who, as we know, was a disciple of St. John, mentions the authors of the four Gospels:

“*Matthew* published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, whilst Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the Church in Rome. After their departure *Mark*, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down in writing to us those things which Peter had preached; and *Luke*, the attendant of Paul, wrote in a book the Gospel which Paul had preached. Afterwards *John*, the disciple of the Lord, who also reclined on His bosom, published his Gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia” (*Adversus Haereses*, HI, 1:i).

e) *Tertullian* (about A.D. 200) regarded the claim to be beyond controversy that the four Gospels had been in the possession of the Church since the time of the Apostles; “Matthew and John being Apostles, Mark and Luke disciples of Apostles” (*Adversus Marcionem*, IV, 2 and 5).

f) *Origen* (born about A.D. 183, died A.D. 253) in Egypt bears the same testimony as Tertullian in Africa and Irenaeus in Asia. He names the four evangelists in the same order as we have them now as the authors of the four Gospels, and says that these four are the only Gospels approved by the Church.

From these testimonies it is clear that the four Gospels were in use at the end of the second century in Churches far apart, and that their genuineness was acknowledged by Catholics and heretics alike. “Probably there is not one of the pagan classics,” Archbishop Sheehan justly remarks, “whose genuineness can be supported by such convincing evidence. No one disputes that Caesar was the author of the *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, and yet the only ancient references to the work are found, about one hundred years after its composition, in the writings of Plutarch and Suetonius.”

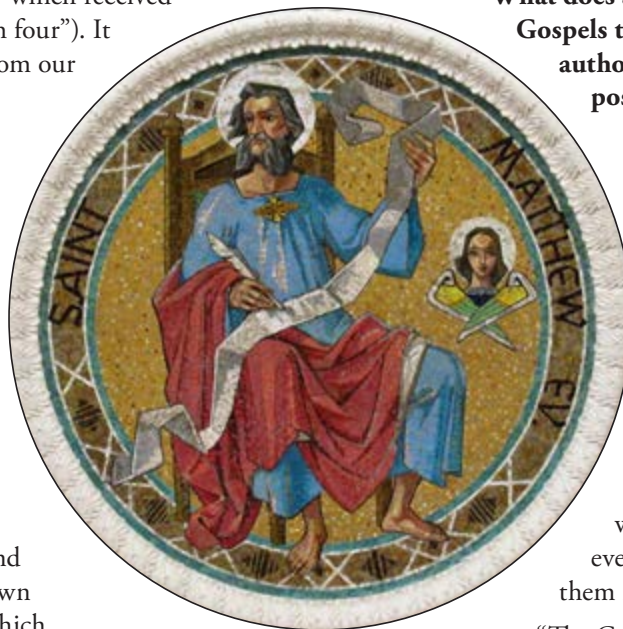
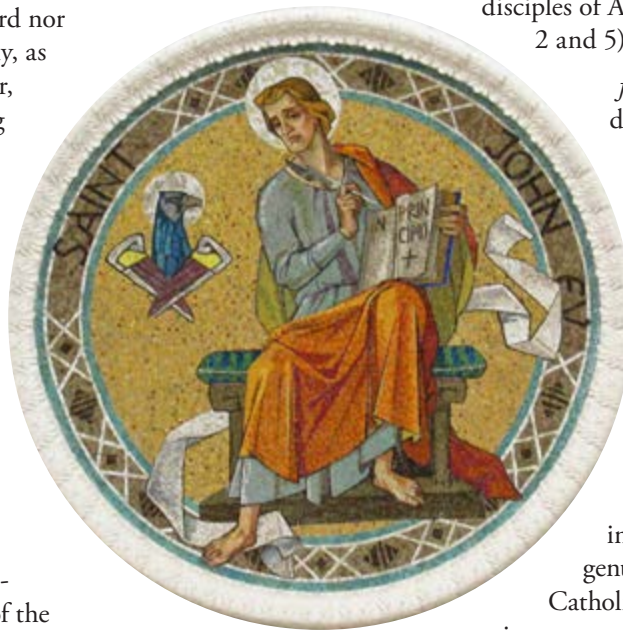
2. Internal Evidence

What does a careful examination of the Gospels themselves tell us about their authors and the time of their composition?—

1. The Gospels are written in Hellenistic Greek, a form of the Greek language strongly marked by Hebrew phrases and idioms, and employed by Jewish writers, such as Philo and Josephus, as a literary medium during the first century after Christ, but not later.

2. The style of the Gospels is vivid and colorful; only men who were themselves witnesses of the events related could have described them in such a manner.

“The Gospels,” says Harnack, “stand in marked contrast to the literature of all succeeding ages. This literary type, this simple and impressive form of narration, could not be reproduced by writers of a later date. It is evident that we have in the Gospels a genuine product of the time which they describe.”



3. In the middle of the 19th century a school of critics, known as the Tuebingen School, tried to show that our Gospels were composed well on in the second century. Those theories are now discredited. “With regard to the first three Gospels it may be confidently asserted that the local coloring in them is predominantly Palestinian, and that they show no sign of acquaintance with questions and circumstances of the second century; and that the fourth Gospel is not such as to justify its being placed, at furthest, much after the beginning of that century” (V. H. Stanton in the *Encyclop. Britan.*, Art. “Gospels”).

4. Those who try to fix the date of the composition of the Synoptic Gospels later than the year 70 A.D. do not do so for any plausible reasons, but solely because they find the prophecy of the ruin of the city and the temple recorded in them; and as they proclaim the impossibility of all prophecy, they have to declare that this prophecy was written *after* the event. The fact, however, that the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem is associated in the Gospels with the prophecy of the end of the world, proves beyond a doubt that it was written down before the year 70. St. Matthew, who always lays special stress on the fulfillment of prophecies, would not have overlooked the fulfillment of Christ’s great prediction if it had already taken place.

B) THE GOSPELS ARE INTACT

Even the most radical opponents of Christianity admit that the Gospels have come down to us substantially intact; that is, free from any grave alterations and additions.

1. We know from St. Justin that from the very beginning the Gospels were read at public worship. The value of this “guarantee of publicity” may be measured by the following incidents: Bishop Spiridion openly rebuked a fellow-bishop who, in quoting a Scripture text, substituted another word having the same meaning as the original, but which appeared more elegant. St. Jerome could with difficulty be prevailed upon by Pope Damasus to revise the old Latin translation of the Bible, for fear of being regarded by the people as a corrupter of the Sacred Text. And this fear of St. Jerome was not groundless. “A bishop of our province,” St. Augustine wrote to him, “having begun to read your

translation of the Bible in his church, came to a passage of the prophet Jonas, which you have translated differently from what was known to the memory and ears of everyone, and sung during many generations. Thereupon a great tumult arose among the people, caused principally by the Greeks, who called out that the text was falsified. . . . The bishop, not to remain without a flock, after this great danger, was obliged to correct the passage as if it was a fault.”

2. There are, it is true, many different *readings* (*variants*, as they are called) in the hundreds of ancient manuscripts of the Gospels that have come down to us, but they prove nothing against the integrity of the Gospels. As they leave untouched the essential parts of every sentence, it is clear that they are due solely to errors of copyists or translators, and that the idea of introducing any *real changes* into the text had never occurred to anyone as at all possible in such a book.

3. An Objection Answered.—But, it may be objected, does not the earliest existing manuscript of the New Testament date only from the fourth century? Isn’t it therefore possible that any number of changes may have been introduced into the Gospel text during the preceding centuries?

We answer: Besides the earliest Greek manuscript, the *Codex Vaticanus* referred to in the objection, we possess other manuscripts nearly as old and not copied from the *Codex Vaticanus*; viz., the *Codex Alexandrinus*, the *Codex Sinaiticus*, and the *Codex of St. Ephrem*. All these manuscripts agree substantially with one another. They also agree with the numerous quotations contained in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, and with the oldest translation of the Gospels, such as the Syrian, which dates from the middle of the second century, and the Latin, which was already old when Tertullian wrote towards the end of the second century.

Hence it is clear that, although we no longer possess the original manuscripts of the Evangelists themselves, the Gospels have remained substantially such as they were written at the beginning.



The Apostles Were Not Deceivers

The hypothesis of deceptive Apostles is very absurd. Let one follow it, throughout; let one imagine these twelve men, assembled after the death of Jesus Christ, conspiring together to say that he was raised from the dead: they attack thereby all powers. The heart of man is strangely inclined to levity, to change, to promises, to possessions. However little one of them might have been shaken by these attractions, and, what is more, by prisons, tortures and death, they had been lost. Let one follow this out.

—Pascal, *Thoughts*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

The Apostles Did Not Invent the Doctrine They Preached

Who among his disciples or among their proselytes was capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus or of imagining the life and character revealed in the Gospels? Certainly not the fishermen of Galilee, as certainly not St. Paul, whose character and idiosyncrasies were of a totally different sort; still less the early Christian writers in whom nothing is more evident than that the good which was in them was all derived, as they always professed that it was derived, from the higher source.

—John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, New York: Longmans, Green & Co., p. 253.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REVIEW

1. Why do the non-Christian contemporaries of the Apostles tell us so little about Christ and Christianity?
2. What facts does Tacitus record about Christ?
3. What does Pliny tell us about the belief and manner of life of the early Christians?
4. What testimony does Josephus bear to Christ?
5. Which Epistles of St. Paul are regarded as genuine even by Rationalists?
6. What is the central theme of the preaching of St. Paul?
7. By what three tests can the historical authority of a book be established?
8. Explain the terms Gospel, Evangelist, Synoptic Gospels.
9. What is the Synoptic Problem?
10. Write a brief account of the four Evangelists.
11. How can we prove that a work is genuine?
12. Show that the Gospels existed in the earliest days of the Church.
13. What does an examination of the Gospels themselves reveal in regard to their authors?
14. Show from the public character of the Gospels that they could not have been tampered with.
15. Which are the most ancient manuscripts and translations of the Gospels?
16. Show that there is stronger evidence for the integrity of the Gospels than for the integrity of the classics.
17. Show that the Evangelists could know the facts they record.
18. Why could they not have invented the portrait of Christ?
19. Show that the Evangelists had to tell the truth.
20. Why is there no doubt in regard to the historical authority of the Acts of the Apostles?
21. Write a brief paragraph on each of the following: *Tacitus*, *Pliny the Younger*, *Suetonius*, *Josephus (Flavius)*, *Talmud*, *Harnack (Adolf)*, *St. Clement of Rome*, *St. Ignatius of Antioch*, *St. Justin Martyr*, *St. Irenaeus*, *Tertullian*, *Origen*, *Philo*, *St. Jerome*, *Apocryphal Gospels*, *Tuebingen School*, *Muratorian Fragment*.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Catholic Encyclopedia, *Articles on the New Testament*.

Courbet, P., *Jesus Christ is God*, section on the Gospels (C.T.S.).

Chesterton, G. K., *The Everlasting Man*, pp. 220 ff.

Messmer, Most Rev. S. G., *Outline of Bible Knowledge*, sections dealing with the New Testament.