



The New Testament is a collection of 27 books of the Bible written in the seventy years following the resurrection of Jesus. The Church of the apostles saw in them an authentic expression of their faith. The Church has officially recognized these books as inspired by God, as the Word of God. Just as in the Old Testament these books did not simply fall from heaven, rather we owe them to the apostles and the evangelists of the early Church. They make no pretense to answer all our questions concerning the faith, but are a collection of testimonies where we discover the person of Jesus, the way in which the early Church saw itself animated and impelled by the power of his resurrection. It was God's will that Christians of every age would know Jesus and his work of redemption through these powerful testimonies.

But, why a *New Testament* after the *Old*?

Simply because each forms a part of salvation history and the revelation of God within history. The cross of Jesus separates these two phases.

In the Old Testament a people is being formed. They grow through their experience, and after having hoped for the thousand and one things that all people look for, they understand that what really matters is to hope for and to seek a Kingdom of Justice where people will be made new. When we read Sacred History, we see the direction it takes and discern different stages and key people. Israel discovers the great value of existence and of social life. We understand why it took them many centuries to discover something of the beyond. We grasp why the prosperity of the ancient kingdom of Israel could not last and why it was necessary for the people of God to gain insight and interiority into what they were losing in earthly power and glory. We see why, after many saviors, the unique Savior came for them while experiencing the final crisis under Roman oppression and the radicalization of political forces.

Thus, the message of Jesus was a call to overcome the narrow-mindedness of their nationalism and fanaticism in order to find here and now *the kingdom and the justice of God*. The history of Israel had to flow into a new era with a universal people of God, who would be rich in the knowledge of the Father and the Son. Such a people would practice non-violence that can overcome divisions and oppression. We know that the Jewish nation collapsed after a few years: it was the end of one world and the rupture of destiny.

The New Testament does not replace the Old. Jesus' preaching does not make the warnings of the prophets irrelevant. Love does not replace justice. The salvation promised to the Jewish people is not replaced by a "salvation of souls," but rather the Gospel is presented as

the liberating truth which redirects history and moves all civilizations toward the goal of reunion and reconciliation in Christ of all human powers and creative energy in the universe.

When attempts to evangelize the Jews in Palestine failed, the first Jewish Christians turned with added incentive to other peoples and announced the Gospel to them. Within a few years, the church began to spread throughout the known world then, that is to say, the nations of the Greco-Roman empire. At first, it was a common belief among Christians that the message would shortly reach the ends of the world, and Jesus would return in glory for judgment. In the seventies this illusion disappeared: history would last longer than they had expected.

The Christian communities began to gather what had been written down to preserve the preaching of the apostles. They also spent time recalling significant experiences of the first Christians. Of the books thus produced, the church approved those which expressed the faith as it was received from the apostles and rejected others which, although very commendable, did not seem to transmit the most fundamental and universal message of the faith.

HOW THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN

The Documents

All the publications of the New Testament and the Gospels in particular, whether they be in English, Spanish, or any other language are translations of original texts written in Greek. Ancient manuscripts containing these texts were copied a number of times, until each of these texts was fixed with the invention of printing; it was probably in 1456 that Guttenberg printed the first Bible.

Those copying the manuscripts could not avoid making some mistakes. By comparing the various manuscripts, grouped according to their differences and their origin, critics can determine what were the original texts which the Catholic Church recognized as the expression of the apostolic faith and as the word of God. The question remains: who wrote these first Gospels and what was their source?

Some beautiful manuscripts of the New Testament from the fourth century have been preserved. They are confirmed by many other much older documents which contain paragraphs or sometimes complete books of the New Testament. Moreover, Christian writers of the second and third centuries oftentimes quote the sacred text upon which they have commented. John's Gospel is considered as dating from the years 90-100, and fragments have been discovered in Egypt, very far from the place of origin. The fragments are dated from the years 120-130.

In what follows, we will pay special attention to the Gospels, though they are not the most ancient writings of the New Testament. When the first three gospels were written, in the years 50-70, Paul had already sent his original letters.

The Authors of the Gospels

It is interesting to note that the first historians of the Church already made special mention of those considered by tradition as the authors of the three synoptic evangelists.

In 110, Papias of Hierapolis (near Ephesus) wrote: "Mark, Peter's interpreter, wrote

with precision, though not in an orderly manner, all that he recalled about the sayings and deeds of the Lord. He accompanied Peter who taught according to the needs of the moment, not in the form of a composition and he made no mistakes in including some things as he remembered them. Matthew put together the sayings of the Lord in Hebrew and from then on everyone translated them according to his ability."

In 185, bishop and martyr Saint Irenaeus wrote: "Matthew published a gospel among the Hebrews and in their language, while Peter and Paul went out to evangelize Rome and establish the Church. After they left, Mark, a disciple and Peter's translator, wrote down Peter's preaching. Luke, Paul's companion, also wrote a book about the Gospel preached by Paul."

These ancient sources about which we could add more, were thoroughly examined by many modern biblical scholars, and lately they have once again been accepted as information of historical value.

Moreover, it would be a mistake to think that the Gospels had been written in one piece by men like Matthew, Mark or Luke who at a given time decided to record by means of the written word the active ministry and the teaching of Jesus.

From the Oral Tradition to Our Gospels

We know that Jesus died when he was still young and that he died without having written anything. Jesus had dedicated most of his time to forming the twelve apostles whom he had chosen. They lived with him, as was the custom of disciples with Jewish teachers. Jesus had them learn his teaching by heart. Instead of multiplying discourses, Jesus repeated the essential truths in many ways. We cannot doubt that, after the days of Pentecost, their concern was to give form to these instructions of Jesus, which were to be the catechesis of the early Church.

At the beginning the apostles witnessed to what they had seen and heard. Gradually

there emerged a need to have a written record of their testimony to safeguard the memory: we ourselves often do this when, during a meeting, the sharing of the participants is recorded for the benefit of those not present.

The Christian communities of Palestine spoke Aramaic or Hebrew according to regions and environment. It follows that the first accounts were drawn up in these two languages. Gradually the texts referring to what Jesus said and did were regrouped; in this way the first Christian communities passed from an oral testimony to a written text: that of the Gospels.

At that time the Greek speaking Christian communities had become a majority and primitive texts were translated into that language.

The Gospel of John

The first three evangelists not only differ in their focus but also in rather different presentations of the deeds and words of Jesus; each actually has his own theology, his own special way of knowing Jesus and it is this profound view, this personal testimony which finally justifies the differences.

In the Gospel of John we find parts of an ancient Gospel as simple as Mark's, with more deeds than words of Jesus, which may have been addressed to the Christian communities of Samaria, and which were written in Aramaic. This was the foundation on which John developed long discourses of Jesus showing that salvation transforms humankind and renews creation.

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT THE GOSPELS SAY?

Most of us have probably asked this: why do we have four testimonies instead of one, and what are they worth? Following what we have just said it will be easy to understand what follows:

- Not all the deeds and words of Jesus are found in the Gospel.

- In relating the words of Jesus, each evangelist expresses them in his own way and adapts them for the better understanding of his readers.

- The events are not always told in the order in which they took place; and things that Jesus said on different occasions can be mixed together in the same passage.

This is not to say that we cannot believe the testimony of the evangelists. We are not given a “photo,” a recording of Jesus' words, but rather four different views that complement each other. Why worry if there are certain contradictions in details. If at the gate of Jericho there was one blind man or two, what difference does it make in the basic message?

The unique place of the Gospels in Literature

The Gospels are exceptional and unique

work among the literary writings of all time. Any comparison with other writings of its time, Christian or otherwise, shows a tremendous contrast—in the Gospels, simplicity and the desire to be temperate, in the other texts, what is marvelous, complex and “not down-to-earth.” A modern philosopher—not a believer—wondered why there were not more miracles in the Gospels. The Gospels carry within them the guarantee of their own authenticity. Taking into account what was said in the previous paragraph, modern criticism has not been able to find falsehood in the Gospels, even though it has scrutinized them with a magnifying glass for more than a century. What is more: the Gospels leave us with a deep sense of meaningfulness each time we are capable of opening ourselves to them.

Those who doubt

Still, those who question the testimony of the Gospels are many. At times it is because they think they see contradictions in the Gospels; more often, because it seems impossible for them to accept miracles. Even among believers who study the Gospels, some have reservations concerning the his-

torical value of anything that could be termed a miracle in the literal sense.

This may be due to the fact that they have been trained in a “scientific” culture which relies only on human resources in order to solve every problem. In a world that covers itself with insurance, little is expected from God and God does not multiply miracles.

They reason the following way: if I cannot now see anything similar to what happened in the Gospel, how am I to believe that such things happened even then? Everything might be different if they were involved in poor or persecuted Christian communities. There they might witness the constant interventions of God for the benefit of those who can only hope in him alone. Actually, in these communities it is said: if today God works such miracles, why would he not have performed them in the time of Jesus and by his order?

In fact it is impossible to study the Gospel “impartially,” as we would do with any ordinary book, for it questions all of our life and not merely our ideas on any point. If we share the same faith of the apostles, we should have no difficulty accepting the sacred books while remaining aware of the critical questions. But if we do not fulfill the conditions that would allow us to “see God,” we feel uneasy until we find some reason to “reduce” the Gospel’s testimony to something which to us seems reasonable; that is to say that it will not question our stance in life itself. That is why many persons, though they admire the Gospels and refuse to consider it a lie, search for a thousand reasons to deny what seems shocking to them; its testimony of God-made-man; a God who moves around among people and who raises the dead.

Some objections

Therefore they especially cling to two main arguments:

– They say that the Gospels were written many years after the death of Jesus when popular imagination had already placed a halo around him. And so, they do not reveal the reality of Jesus to us, but rather the faith of the Church in the first century. (Let us remember what we said about the date when the Gospels were written.)

– They also say that the Gospels were writings destined for the catechesis and teaching of Christians: the facts they relate are aimed at supporting what is taught. Hence it is not important whether Jesus walked on the water or not; the episode was written to show that Jesus possessed divine power.

But what about the apostles? They had been Jesus’ witnesses, and their function was to remain his official witnesses within the Church. They knew what had actually happened; would they have remained silent while some were distorting the history of Jesus? The guarantee of the Gospel is found in the very structure of the Catholic Church, which was never a group of spontaneous believers carried away by enthusiasm or opportunism.

The Gospels came from the *tradition of the apostles*, and the Church retained them because it recognized this tradition in them. In those very years and during the following century, other “gospels” were written: “the gospel of Peter,” “the gospel of Thomas,” “the gospel of Nicodemus,” “the proto-gospel of James.” The Church, however, did not accept them because of the fantastic events recorded in them, or because of theological orientation which did not conform to the teaching received from the apostles.

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