

## **Chapter 1: Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition**

*“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17*

The goal for writing this chapter is to prove through rational argument the belief of many Christians in Serbia and throughout the world: that the only binding authority in questions of faith for all Christians must be solely and exclusively the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, excluding any later written or oral traditions added to the original canon. These oral and written “additions” within the Orthodox Church are labeled “Sacred Tradition,” which derives from a diversity of religious teachers (known as “the Holy Fathers”) from later centuries.<sup>1</sup> Their interpretations of the Bible greatly diverge from the source of Christian thought and faith that was present in the first century preaching Christ and the apostles. My readers will be convinced of the truth of these assertions through their acquaintance with the historical facts and Biblical arguments contained in the pages of this work. But first I would like to discuss very carefully the main theme of this chapter, which concerns the definition of the terms “Holy Scripture” and “Sacred Tradition”, and the inspiration by God in the former and the alleged source of inspiration for the latter.

### **What Is Scripture?**

Throughout the history of Christ’s Church, and especially the European Protestant Reformation onwards, evangelical Christianity has strongly advocated the belief that Holy Scripture (the Bible) is a unique and perfect revelation of God and His will for humanity. Scripture is the Book of books, a collection of 66 books in total, 39 of which comprise the Old Testament, and the remaining 27 comprise the New Testament. The Old Testament was written by God’s servants (the prophets, kings, and Levitical priests) over the course of a thousand years. It is believed that the first book of the Bible written actually began with the sufferings of Job (whose life is chronologically placed somewhere during the life of Jacob, the father of the people of Israel), while subsequent books were recorded by the prophet Moses.

The Old Testament (written between 1500 - 400 BC) is the Lord’s proclamation given to sinful people in the bondage of death that God will send a future Redeemer - who will be none other than his eternal Son - the second person of the divine Trinity. The New Testament (written in the second half of the century after Christ), however, comprises the records of the Apostles who were eyewitnesses and witnesses of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, including His sufferings, His vicarious sacrifice for the sins of humankind, and His glorious resurrection from the dead.

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<sup>1</sup> All of those who in the most modern times, including our century, living or canonized as saints, that is, “Holy Fathers,” including monks, bishops, and patriarchs who had recently died.

The verse at the beginning of the chapter comes from the Second Epistle by the Apostle Paul written to Timothy. It states that the Scriptures give us the knowledge that God inspired the apostles, taught by their Teacher and Savior Jesus, firmly believed that the whole of Scripture (from the first to the last sentence) is inspired by the perfect and inerrant Lord God.

A topic of particular importance to evangelical Christians is the issue of which books truly belong to the Holy Scriptures. Despite the existence of many other ancient books that purport to be called "holy", only 66 books that are in the so-called "Narrow", i.e. Protestant canon of the Bible have divine inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Only this book (which, by God's grace, we have in Serbian language) is a perfect and inerrant manuscript because God the Creator authored in it His magnificent salvation accomplished through His beloved Son. Scripture in its 66 books is the exclusive source of God's revelation and excludes any other source for knowledge of God and His truth. It is the sole source of revelation for the individual sinner led to salvation and for the Christian church at large in daily devotion and worship. Let us read further to demonstrate this reality.

### **The Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures**

*“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>*

In the New Testament text above, one of the first disciples of Christ, the apostle Peter, addresses the problems facing people who want to properly understand certain biblical prophecies. It is his firm belief in the Bible that the writers (including himself) wrote down their texts under the direct inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. During the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ and his Apostles, the only Scriptures they read (as well as their contemporaries) were the books of the Old Testament. Because the Old Testament collection of sacred writings were written by Israelites (i.e. Jews, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), this nation had, at that time, the unusual privilege of being the only nation to read texts inspired by God. As the prophesied Messiah of God and founder of the Christian religion, Jesus Christ preached and taught that all Old Testament writings (which we now have in our Bibles) are fully inspired by God and absolutely indispensable. Expressing his opinion about the Biblical inspiration of the Old Testament, the Son of God said:

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<sup>2</sup> The only two previous editions and translations of the entire Holy Scriptures (Old and New Testament) in the Serbian language contain the "narrow" canon, that is, the Protestant Biblical canon of 66 books. These are Bible translations made by Djure Danicic, Vuk Karadzic, and Dr. Louis Bakotic. It is important to note that by far the largest number of printed Bibles in many common languages, by the grace of God, has consisted only of God-inspired books (the canon of 66) without Apocryphal texts. As will be mentioned later in our study, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches recognize other books as inspired by God and helpful for spiritual growth and education. Fortunately, these books were not originally translated into Serbian language Bibles. (In other words, these books were rejected by ancient Jewish and Christian authorities since these other books contained beliefs opposed to the teaching of the original Biblical texts.)

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 1:20-21

*"For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled."*<sup>4</sup>

### **The Divine Inspiration of the Old Testament Canon**

The Jewish canon of the Old Testament (i.e. the whole of the Jewish Scripture, for they do not recognize the New Testament), which is also called "narrow" (i.e. "Palestinian") is completely identical to today's so-called "Protestant" canon of the Old Testament. The only difference is that the Jewish biblical canon includes 24 books (instead of 39). The reason is that some books in the Jewish Bible are grouped into one book. For example, the 24 books are traditionally divided into three groups:

- (1) Law (which consists of the Pentateuch, or the 5 books of Moses)
- (2) Prophets (that is, "the Major Prophets": Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel (which is combined into 1 book), 1 and 2 Kings (also 1 book), Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and "the Minor Prophets": 12 smaller books of the prophets which are also considered as 1 entire book)
- (3) Writings (Job, Proverbs, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Daniel)

In addition, the order of books listed in the Jewish Bible (Old Testament) is not the same as in the case of the Christian Bible. The Jewish Bible starts with Genesis but ends with 2 Chronicles (instead of the Book of Malachi in the case with the Old Testament in the Christian Scriptures). Regarding ways of forming the canon of the Jewish Bible, in his work *The Holy Scriptures for the Serbs*, Branko Bjelajac, says the following:

"The Roman soldier and historian Flavius Josephus, who was of Jewish origin, gives us the first known written classification of the books of the Old Testament as the 'holy books' or 'holy writings', about 100 years after Christ. For him, the main feature of this literature was contained in the fact that these writings were **divine announcements of undoubted authority**, which occurred in the age of the prophets, and therefore they were **under divine inspiration**. Flavius claims the first Bible was published under the Medo-Persian Emperor Artaxerxes around 424 B.C. It is believed that this was partially done by the prophet Ezra, while the rest of the writings were arranged by the prophet Nehemiah."<sup>5</sup>

Even though the Old Testament Canon had already been assembled no later than the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., in later centuries, others added additional Jewish historical books which also contained religious elements. In either the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C., seventy-two interpreters in Alexandria, Egypt translated the Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek along with these other history books. This translation was called "Septuagint" (from the Latin LXX i.e. "translation of the seventy - or 72"). These histories are also called "Apocrypha" due to the fact that not only do they claim historical data, but they also contain religious ideas and teachings not in accordance with the claim of inspiration from

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<sup>4</sup> Mt. 5:18

<sup>5</sup> *Scriptures for the Serbs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Alpha and Omega: Belgrade, 2003), 14-15. Author's emphasis.

God. Before the capture of Judea by the Romans in the war fought from 66-73 AD, Flavius Josephus, a Jewish officer and a devout Pharisee, said this about the Old Testament Canon:

“For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, [as the Greeks have,] but only twenty-two<sup>6</sup> books, which contain the records of all the past times; **which are justly believed to be divine**; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, **but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time**; and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain Divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be willingly to die for them.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, what the historian Flavius Josephus wrote can be verified by the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ never once quotes from any of the books of the Apocrypha (even though people among the Jewish diaspora spoke Greek and read the Septuagint in Koine Greek). Neither did Jesus quote sayings of past Rabbis (famous Jewish teachers), although it was the custom among the prominent rabbis of His time to do so. Christ solely relied solely on Holy Scripture.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to observe that Jesus refers to the Jewish canon of the Bible as the basis for the Lord’s coming wrath upon the Jews of this lawless era for their rejection of the Messiah:

*“Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, **from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.** Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> The Jews sometimes combined the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth into one book instead of three.

Hence, this accounts for the difference between the number of 22 mentioned above with the traditional count of 24 books in the Jewish Bible. For one who holds this view, refer to: Dragan Simov, *What Scripture Says*, 2nd Edition, (Alpha and Omega: Belgrade, 1996), 39.

A similar argument is made that Ruth and Judges are combined into one book as are Jeremiah and Lamentations, thus yielding a similar result of 22 books instead of 24 books, though the time in the canon does not yield any changes. See: *Journal of Theology by the Department of Theology - Novi Sad*, Vol. 2, 2002, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Simov, 38-9. Author’s emphasis. See also Keith King, “Josephus and the Old Testament” and Translation by William Whiston, *Flavius Josephus against Apion* (1, 8, 38) on <http://amazinghealth.com/165.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to the following verses: Mt. 5:17-18, 22:29-32, 37-40, Mk. 7:8-9, Lk. 4:17-21, 18:31-33, 24:27, 32, 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Mt. 23:33-36 (See also Zechariah 1:1.) Author’s emphasis.

Jesus mentions "all the righteous blood shed on the earth", including that of Abel (the son of Adam and Eve who killed his brother Cain) and Zechariah, the son of Berechiah. The death of the just Abel is described in the first book of the Jewish Bible, Genesis 4:8-11, and the death of Zacharias is recounted in the last book of the same Bible, Second Chronicles 24:20-22. Many of God's servants who remain nameless lost their lives, especially during the time of the Maccabees, the name of some books of the Apocrypha. Despite this fact, Christ the Lord only states the names of two innocent men who were murdered, one from the beginning and one at the end of the Jewish Bible. He affirms the Jewish canon, starting with Genesis, the first book of Moses, and ending with the second book of Chronicles, the last book of God's Old Testament revelation. He omits the apocryphal literature. This canon was finally confirmed at the end of the first century AD, by distinguished Jewish Rabbis:

"In this respect, we should mention the Council of Jewish military leaders in the public place (Latin Jamnia) under the leadership of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, not far from Jerusalem around the 90th year (A.D. – editor). This council emerged from the need to determine whether some recent books such as the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach could be added to the canon. The council upheld the "strict" Jewish canon affirmed back in the 5th century B.C. The rabbinic tradition stated that God has declared Himself through an uninterrupted line of people from Moses to Ezra whom He inspired to write the canon. ...**It is important to emphasize that the Jamnian Council brought no new conclusions or resolutions, but only confirmed the canon that for centuries was generally accepted among the Jews.**"<sup>10</sup>

Today in the Serbian language, we have the "narrow" canon of the Old Testament (also called the Palestinian Canon, the only version which Jesus and the apostles accepted). However, the Roman Catholic Church at the fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1546 A.D. decided to add additional books to its canon. Rome accepted the "broad" or Alexandrian Canon of the Greek translation of the Septuagint. Therefore, today's Roman Catholic version of the Bible contains a total of 46 books (instead of 39) in the Old Testament. The extra books also include additional chapters in the books of Daniel and Esther.

However, regarding the canon of the Old Testament which is recognized and accepted by the Orthodox Church, Branko Bjelajac in his book *Holy Scripture for Serbs* writes:

"The Orthodox Church derived its canon of the Old Testament based upon the directions of the Church Fathers, including Athanasius of Alexandria (which recognizes Baruch as canonical), Gregory the Theologian, Cyril of Jerusalem and others. Saint Sava took them and published the canon in his Canon of Law (Nomokanon). However, today there exist two different factions amongst the theologians of the Serbian Orthodox Church. One side considers the actual canon of the Old Testament to be the "strict" or Palestinian Canon (which is published in the translation by Dzhure Daničić and Dr. Louis Bakotić); **while others, a younger generation of theologians, accept the so-called "broad" or Alexandrian Canon.** This expanded canon includes both the Palestinian Canon and the Apocrypha, by which they justify the support of many Church Fathers: Basil the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Ephraim the Ascetic, John Chrysostom, etc. ... They made an effort to resolve the debate at the Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes, Greece in 1961. They decided to convene a grand council which should consider the authority of the Apocryphal books that are read in Orthodox churches. **A future**

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<sup>10</sup> *Journal of Theology by the Department of Theology - Novi Sad*, Vol. 2, 2002, 49. Author's emphasis.

**Eighth Ecumenical Council is expected to finally determine the canon of the Old Testament of the Orthodox Church...** However, regardless of future decisions, some professors at the Theological Faculty of the Serbian Orthodox Church currently teach students that the canon of the Old Testament includes: the Books of Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, the Epistle of Jeremiah, the Book of Baruch, First, Second, and Third Maccabees, and the three books of Esdras, which is an extension of the broader canon of Alexandria (which the Roman Catholic Church accepts)... On the other hand, Professor Dims Peric, in his book on Church law, the second edition of 1999, the textbook for the Law Faculty in Belgrade, considers the Palestinian Canon as the Old Testament canon without any hesitation. This is also the case for Daničić and Bakotić as well as in translation, even as it is also called Protestant... It is obvious that questions such as what comprises the canon of the Old Testament, which books are inspired by God, and which books are Apocryphal stir great disagreement among Orthodox theologians even within the one Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church.”<sup>11</sup>

And here is what the same Protestant theologian tells us about the historical development of attitudes toward the canon of the Old Testament among eastern religious authorities, particularly in the seventeenth century:

“In the years 1642 at Jassy and 1672 at Jerusalem, Orthodox Councils confirmed these books as 'genuine parts of Scripture': 1 Esdras (3<sup>rd</sup> Esdras in the Vulgate), Tobit, Judith, 1, 2 and 3 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, and the Letter of Jeremiah. This canon is known as the canon 'Septuagint Plus'... Orthodox theologians believe that the changes in the Septuagint were made by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that they have accepted them as part of God's ongoing revelation... However, the situation between the Orthodox churches today is ambiguous. The Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 and the Council of Constantinople in 869 affirmed some apocryphal books as authoritative. During the centuries that followed after the Great Schism of 1054, the question had not stoked any strong interest. **However, in response to the publication of the Confession by Cyril Lukaris, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, a Council convened in Jassy in 1642. This Council condemned Lukaris and removed him from his throne.**<sup>12</sup>

Probably one of the most important synods in the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church was held in 1672 in Jerusalem. This Council sought to counter the influence of Cyril and the Lukaris 'Calvinist'

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<sup>11</sup> Branko Bjelajac, *Holy Scriptures for the Serbs*, 2nd Edition, (Belgrade, 2003), 20-2. Author's emphasis. It is interesting to note that Protodeacon Radomir Radic, an Orthodox theologian, in his work *A Bible Dictionary* considers the Old Testament to contain 39 books, which corresponds to the "narrow" canon. In contrast, the Metropolitan of Montenegro on the Sea included in the canon (though he considered these books "extracanonical" rather than "apocryphal"): 1 Esdras, the 3 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, the additions of Daniel (Susanna, Prayer of Azariah, the Song of the Three Holy Children, Bel and the Dragon), the additions of Esther, Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. In the preface to his translation of the book "The Wisdom of Solomon", he states that the Serbian Orthodox Church used it in the old Church Slavonic translation. (Bjelajac, *Holy Scriptures for the Serbs*, 21.) The Orthodox teacher Goran Radenkovic advocates the position that the Old Testament includes 46, not 39 books, including 7 books that are considered canonical (and which also are found in Roman Catholic Bibles): "The Old and New Testaments which comprise the Bible are the canon of 73 books that arose from nearly 1,000 years ago. 46 books comprised the Old Testament and 27 books the New Testament. *St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, No. 4 (24), 1998, 61. Author's emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Translator's note: in reality, Lukaris was strangled to death in 1638, four years before the Jassy council. See pp.798-9 of this book.

group. These books of wisdom, Judith, Tobit, the additions of Daniel, and the 4 Maccabean books, **were deemed canonical.**"<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, in contrast to the conclusions of the various Orthodox Councils mentioned earlier, Orthodox teachings of "Holy Tradition" (which we will examine in the second half of this chapter) differ from the views of many Orthodox patriarchs, bishops and other contemporary theologians. It is important to note that Orthodoxy claims "Holy Tradition" to have similar inspiration from God as the Holy Scriptures. Canon 33 of the provincial Council of Carthage (whose decision is also considered part of "sacred tradition") denies the canonicity of some of the books mentioned above. Here is the section of the canon<sup>14</sup> that defines the number of books in the Old Testament:

"Rule 33: **Apart from the canonical books, no one is to read any other book** in the temple.

This very rule also establishes that, **apart from the canonical books**, nothing else under the name of the divine books, can be read in the temples. And **these books comprise the canon**: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, the two books of Paralipomenon (i.e., two books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah), Job, Psalms, five books of Solomon, twelve books of the minor prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Esther, two books of Maccabees, and the two books of Esdras."<sup>15</sup>

The above list has a total of 42 books, including the previously mentioned Tobit and Judith. However, this Council expressly states that the third book of Maccabees, Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, and others **are not canonical and cannot be read in Orthodox temples**. The canons (laws) of this local Council of Carthage are included in the *Book of the Canons of the Orthodox Church*. As such, these rules should be observed. Yet these laws are not observed, neither by the Orthodox who support the "narrow" canon of the Bible, nor by those who support the "broader" canon of the Septuagint (also called "Septuagint Plus"). Therefore, it appears that the issue of canonicity or lack of canonicity of certain Apocryphal books remains an open question. It awaits a future "Ecumenical Council". Based on recent announcements, one should not hold his breath for a timely resolution of this issue.

Thus we have just demonstrated that only the Protestant evangelical churches adhere to the canon of the Old Testament to which the Lord Jesus Christ followed. This contrasts with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. (After 2000 years of Christianity, neither the Western nor Eastern Churches has yet to come to an agreement as to which books belong in the Bible. Perhaps, this issue will remain an open question for Romanism and Orthodoxy until the second coming of Christ.) Let us now examine the question of what books belong to the New Testament.

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<sup>13</sup> *Theological Journal of the Department of Theology*, Novi Sad, Vol.2, 2002, 45. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>14</sup> Two church Councils occurred in Carthage in 397 and 419 A.D. They considered the question of which books belonged to the Scriptures and which ones did not.

<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Canons of the Orthodox Church*, (Shibenik 2003), 94. Emphasis is mine.

## The Inspiration by God of the Canon of the New Testament

This collection of books was written by Christ's apostles and their closest associates in the first century of our era. As opposed to the Old Testament (the Jewish Bible), we can only include the New Testament in the "Christian Bible" after the completion of the apostolic era (2nd Century after Christ). Around the same time of the completion of the apostles' writings (Epistles, Gospels, and Revelation), identified as inspired by God, there also appeared other Apocryphal writings written by authors more or less under the influence of non-Christian philosophies or else enlightened by their own minds and not the Holy Spirit. Here is one view on the Apocrypha related by Radomir Rakic:

"Around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D., there was a body of literature written, including apocryphal gospels, apocryphal acts, epistles, and even apocalypses (modeled after Revelation), **usually written under the pseudonym of some apostle, and they always reflect some special vision. Early Christians who were familiar with the canonical books of the New Testament were quick to reject such apocryphal books. One time I was involved in such a matter concerning the Gospel of Thomas, which they recently found in a Coptic version. Others were not ready to reject it.** While they were aware that all the details they needed are found in the four Gospels, independent of however much they wanted to consider the Gospel of Thomas as an authoritative tradition, nonetheless it has a peculiar Gnostic overtone."<sup>16</sup>

After the death of the Apostles (and even during their lifetime), controversy arose related to the question of the authenticity ("originality") of the religious writings that were read in Christian churches – that is, which ones were truly inspired by God. The apostle Paul specifically warned Christians in the middle of the First Century A.D. at the churches in Thessaloniki that some were writing and distributing apocryphal epistles which the Apostles did not write and contained content that was heretical and departed from the apostolic teachings. They made it possible to determine who truly believed the Gospel of Christ as the Apostles taught:

*"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way..."<sup>17</sup>*

Since he was an apostle, Paul dictated the epistles he wrote to a secretary word by word. The signature of Paul's epistles was always different (because the secretaries wrote it down by hand – it was their handwriting but Paul's words which he dictated). Naturally, this situation created problems for readers in the First Century regarding how they could recognize which epistles were actually authored by Paul on the one hand as opposed to others written by false teachers. Thus, the apostle had to write the last few words of the epistles with his own hand. The churches whom Paul addressed the epistles would recognize his handwriting. Paul explained that he did this to prevent the faithful believers from being deceived by false teachers:

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<sup>16</sup> *St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, Vol. 1-2, No. 29-30 (Prizren, 2000), 93. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Thess. 2:1-3. Author's emphasis.



*“This salutation by my own hand—Paul. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. Amen.”*<sup>18</sup>

*“I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, **which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters.** This is how I write.”*<sup>19 20</sup>

The Evangelist Luke has also confirmed a known fact that many people attempted to describe events from the life of Jesus Christ and his closest friends and associates (the question is how successfully and faithfully?):

*“Inasmuch as **many** have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.”*<sup>21</sup>

Under the label "many" used the first verse of the first chapter of his gospel, Luke did not include the evangelists Matthew and Mark, who wrote their gospels approximately the same time when he himself wrote his gospel. (The apostle John wrote his gospel much later than the other three evangelists.) These "many" were Christian (or perhaps even "Christian Gnostic") writers who wrote biographical works about the life and work of Jesus Christ. These works were inferior to the four gospels in the New Testament because they either were not perfect (because their works were not inspired by the Holy Spirit), or else unreliable due to the inclusion of many legendary events or sayings that did not occur in the time Christ was on the earth. For this reason, the evangelist Luke strictly emphasizes that he has all rights to have "investigated everything from the beginning," which means:

- (1) There existed so-called “gospels” that obviously were inaccurate.
- (2) Thus, their writings are not included among the books of the New Testament.

Because of the existence of a number of these "biographers of Christ" and writers of pseudo-apostolic epistles, during the first and especially in the second century after Christ (and also in several centuries following), many of these books deviate from the gospels about Christ that His apostles wrote. Examples among the many religious documents that Christians read in the second and third centuries included: the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospels of Peter, Nicodemus, Mary, Thomas, Matthias, the Protoevangelium of James

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<sup>18</sup> Col. 4:18.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Thess. 3:17. (NIV) Author's emphasis. Some Bible scholars might ask the question why Paul did not decide just to write the whole text of his epistles himself, especially if he was concerned with protecting believers from spiritual deception by counterfeit letters? One possible answer is that Paul in the last years of his life might have had very poor vision (perhaps far-sightedness?), which inhibited his handwriting. Potential support for this hypothesis lies in Galatians 4:15, where he says that the words he wrote were in very large letters, and Galatians 6:11, where he says that the believers in Galatia loved him to the extent that they would have plucked out their very own eyes and given them to him if they had been able.

<sup>20</sup> Rom. 16:22 says: *“I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.”* In reality, it becomes clear that the Apostle Paul is the author of the Epistle to the Romans. Tertius simply is one person who volunteered to write down what Paul dictated to him.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 1:1-4. Emphasis is mine.

(Book of the birth of Mary), the Acts of Andrew, Paul, John, and others. These books were alleged to have been written by the apostles or their close friends (so that these books would be accepted by unwitting Christians). However, there existed another type of religious book at the end of the first and early second Century AD. These books were allegedly written by successors to the Apostles and the elders of Christian churches in order to instruct believers. For example, some documents from Ignatius, the elder of the church at Antioch, include his seven epistles addressed to the Romans, Ephesians, Trallians, Smyrnaeans, Philadelphians, Magnesians, and Polycarp, two epistles addressed to the Corinthians by Clement of Rome, and the Epistle to the Philippians by Polycarp.

By the time of the Second Century, this proliferation of literature caused confusion amongst Christians. Which books truly deserved to be classified in the canon of the New Testament? Which books ought to be rejected as those that advocate teaching that departs from the apostolic teaching? It becomes apparent that many Christian authorities of that time (and later) accepted certain Apocryphal books as authentic and inspired by God, but later they rejected these books. They rejected others that later were determined to have actually been written by the apostles. The biggest controversy surrounded the authenticity of the New Testament book of the Revelation to John, although other books also were not spared, such as 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Judah, and Hebrews. However, the Lord in His great revelation and mercy wished to give to mankind a fully authoritative collection of books in which He unmistakably reveals His eternal truth. The Lord eventually directed the thoughts of sinful people prone to error to collect the New Testament canon in its final form that we have it today. Bjelajac comments on when and how we received the canon of the New Testament:

“There appeared a ‘new’ gospel and a new interpretation. However, **the basis for including a book in the canon derived from the authenticity of the doctrine that coincided with that of the apostles.** During this time, there was no official institution or organization that conducted the systematic review of the New Testament books. This lack of an institution helped to spawn the appearance of heretics who offered their own versions of ‘Holy Scriptures’. In the third and fourth century, the churches recognized the books that comprise the canon of the New Testament that we have today. The Eastern Church played a major role in defining which books belonged to the New Testament of the Bible. By the middle of the fourth century, there was no longer any doubt as to the authenticity of the New Testament texts, with the exception of Revelation, which was not included on the list of books of the New Testament at the Council of Laodicea in 367 AD.

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in 367 proclaimed in his 39<sup>th</sup> epistle to his faithful congregants that the canon of the New and Old Testaments were already determined and could never be changed. In Egypt there arose major problems within local churches that would accept and interpret only the original text, such that Athanasius felt compelled to write down the content of what comprised Scripture, e.g. the canon of the New Testament. That same year, at the recommendation of Athanasius, members of the churches at the Council of Laodicea adopted his list. Athanasius gave a list of books which he said were ‘passed on by the fathers to be read only by those who believe in Christianity and seek godly instruction.’ The Roman Church also accepted the canon compiled by Athanasius at the Roman Synod of 382 under Pope Damasus. The Council of Carthage in 397 recognized all the books canonized as the Old and New Testaments, including the Revelation to John. A future Council of Carthage held in 419 reconfirmed the decision of the prior Council. However, some consider that the New Testament canon was only fully accepted and adopted by all the churches at the Second Council of Constantinople (also called the Quinisext or Council of Trullo) in 692. This Council split on adopting two versions of the New Testament canon: one which included the Revelation to John and the

other which omitted it. Only in the Scriptures of the Greek churches in the tenth century can one find the Revelation of John as part of the New Testament.”<sup>22</sup>

We have demonstrated how Christians discerned the apostolic books as inspired by God and applicable for teaching people the Christian faith. We also saw how they rejected a host of apocryphal books. Now we need to address yet another very critical issue. Though it might seem redundant given that we had addressed it earlier, it is crucial to clarify the issue: “When was the New Testament actually formed?”

### **When Was the New Testament Formed, and Who Were the Authors of these Books?**

We need to deal with this question because the theologians of the Orthodox Church constantly insist on the thesis that the “Church of Christ” (what they call the “Orthodox Church”) existed before the New Testament, and that the Church wrote and decisively influenced the final formation of the canon of the New Testament! Does this validate the claim of the Orthodox Church (indeed, this is the thesis that the Orthodox want to prove) that since it is the only “true and authentic Church of Christ”, that only the Orthodox Church has the spiritual authority to render interpretation of Scripture? This thesis is particularly emphasized during the debate with orthodox evangelical Protestants (for that matter, with any religious committee that is not Eastern Orthodox), when they dispute certain beliefs of Eastern Orthodoxy that find no support in the Bible. Here is one example from Protodeacon Radomir Rakic of the Serbian Orthodox Church:

“The existence and nature of the canon implies the existence of the Church. This fact leads to the logical conclusion that without the Church there would be no New Testament. Just as the New Testament expresses the response (practical fulfilling) to the will of Christ by the apostles and their disciples, so the Church expresses the same response (practical fulfilling). **While the New Testament is the fruit of the Church, yet the Church is not the fruit of the New Testament.** The Church could have had the opportunity to preach, and it did actually preach the Gospel without the mediation of the New Testament, but The New Testament could not have arisen independently of the Church.”<sup>23</sup>

The next quote will come from the pen of the Orthodox priest James Bernstein (an American who was born Jewish). This theologian explains, among other things, why he converted from evangelical Protestantism to Eastern Orthodoxy. He asserts the main reason for his conversion was the recognition of Eastern Orthodoxy as the personification of historic Christianity. Since Protestantism as a movement only started in the sixteenth century, according to Bernstein’s opinion, it was not possible for it to be “the original Church of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Before he became interested in Orthodoxy, according to Bernstein,

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<sup>22</sup> Bjelajac, *Holy Scriptures for the Serbs*, 23-4.

<sup>23</sup> Text by Radomir Rakic in *St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, Vol. 1-2, No. 29-30 (Prizren, 2000), 89. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> When they have theological “debates” with Protestants, Orthodox authors quite often pull out the mistaken thesis (a “straw man” argument) that evangelical Protestant belief stems from the time of the origin of specific Protestant denominations from a few centuries ago. These Orthodox authors assert that in contrast to their recent Protestant “straw man”, the character of so-called “Historical Christianity” in the world today exists in the form of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

in general he was not familiar with the history of the formation of the canon of the New Testament. Bernstein eventually concluded that he must join the church that “created” the New Testament – that is, the Eastern Orthodox Church:

“In my early Christian years, I acquired the majority of my religious education through reading the Bible. When I went to college, a pocket edition of the Bible was my constant companion. I memorized favorite parts of the Bible by heart. When I faced temptations, I would recite them to myself, or else when I wanted to bring someone to Christ, I would share other verses... My perspective was that whatever was good enough for the Apostles was good enough for me personally. **Then I received my first surprise.** As I mentioned before, I knew that the apostle Paul considered all Scripture to be inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16). But I always thought that the "Scripture" which he cited meant the whole Bible, both the Old and the New Testament. In reality, there was no 'New Testament' when he wrote this verse... When the apostles were living and teaching, neither the New Testament nor the Old Testament were yet completed. (*Author's note: Bernstein presumes the final canonization of the books of the Jewish Bible by the rabbis at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. As we have read before, many including the Lord Jesus Christ Himself recognized the Old Testament canon well before Jamnia!*) The concept of "Scripture" was much less defined than I imagined... **Another great surprise occurred** when I realized that the first complete list of what the New Testament books we have today appeared over three hundred years after the death and resurrection of Christ... For me, it was hard to imagine that the Church survived and grew without the complete New Testament. It may have been the first key to deciphering the fact that the totality of the church something much more than just the written word... **The next thing that surprised me** was the discovery that many other "gospels" in addition to those in the New Testament canon circulated in the first and second centuries. They included the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel by the Egyptians, the Gospel of Peter, to name a few... I became particularly interested in the search for the oldest legitimate list of the New Testament books. Some believe that it is the Muratorian canon at the end of the second century. It **excludes** Hebrews, James, Peter and the two Epistles of Peter (*Author's note: some texts inspired by God*). Yet it does **include** the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon (*Author's note: some of the Apocryphal books*)... **In the course of time, the Church has established which books truly are apostolic writings and which books are not...** Instead of trying to judge the church based on my own modern prejudices, **I had to calm down and to unite with the Church that created the New Testament**, and she taught me to the proper understanding of Scripture... **Today the Orthodox Church has clear and direct historical continuity with the Church of the Apostles, and she has preserved the Holy Scriptures intact along with Holy Tradition, which helps us to interpret the Scriptures in the right way.** As soon as I had understood these things, I myself turned to Orthodoxy.”<sup>25</sup>

We have shown that the Orthodox Church indeed does argue that “the Church” created the New Testament. Precisely for that reason Orthodoxy asserts it alone has the "correct" way to interpret Scriptures, and no one else does, especially Protestants. When was the New Testament actually formed? Perhaps more precisely, when were these books collected, or in other words, when were the New Testament books written?

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In reality, Catholicism and Orthodoxy have incorporated a vast number of teachings and beliefs introduced in church dogma through many centuries. The Protestants wanted to bring "reform" in the practices of the Church and return it to its original and apostolic roots of the Christianity of the first century. My book will demonstrate this truth with support from data and analysis that Orthodoxy in fact has introduced numerous teachings and practices that have absolutely no foundation from the sacred texts of the Old and New Testaments.

<sup>25</sup> *The Bible without God Is Like Christianity without the Church*, (Svetigore: Tsenitse, 1997), 8-25. Author's emphasis.

No one, especially evangelical Protestants, denies the fact that the New Testament books were written several decades after the founding of Christ's Church (which was "born" when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles ten days after Christ's ascension to heaven). Thus, it is true that the Church wrote the New Testament, or, better stated, some members of the Church, namely the apostles and their close associates. The truth is that the Church existed without a single New Testament book for at least two decades (since the apostles began to write their epistles only after 50 AD). Christians preached the gospel through word of mouth (or through oral "tradition", as the Orthodox like to call it). Of course, at that time, special gifts of the Holy Spirit (which are now absent) existed in the church. One of these gifts was prophecy by which the early Christians, along with the apostles' preaching, explained God's will due to the lack of authoritative written sources.<sup>26</sup> It is true that the Church could have continued to survive without any written sources (i.e. without the books of the New Testament), but only if the Church completely devoted itself to Christ in continuing to pass down the apostolic teachings and practices from generation to generation. However, just as the apostles had warned the Church, various sources of false teaching entered the Church. Not only false teachers including Judaizers, Gnostics, and others, but even some of the elders themselves (also known as presbyters or bishops) whom the apostles personally ordained were active in seducing naïve believers away from Christ's pure Gospel. They rejected the apostolic teaching and "destroyed the flock."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it became critical for the apostles to explain very meticulously and thoroughly every detail of the sole true doctrine of Christ and teach it to the Church. The false teachers at the time of the apostles do not differ much from those of latter days. On many occasions they managed to draw Christians from the true Gospel and disturb them.<sup>28</sup> How much more damage could false teachers do after the death of the witnesses of Christ, those who had the opportunity to personally hear the words from the lips of the Savior? What else could preserve the truth but the actual writings of the Apostles themselves? Plenty of evidence abounds, some cited by Bernstein the convert to Orthodoxy, that the early Church Fathers suffered great confusion as to which writings came from the apostles and which did not. On the other hand, because of certain abuses of sacred texts and their erroneous interpretation by the false teachers, church authorities in later centuries fell into apostasy. As a consequence, they accepted heretical interpretations invented by the false teachers regarding actual texts inspired by God.

One notable example is the rejection of the Revelation of John from the Biblical canon that has authority and inspiration from God that began from the fourth century onwards, in spite of the fact that the Church accepted Revelation as inspired by God all the way from the early second century AD. Church leaders from the post-Apostolic era were not exactly "up to the task" that the Apostle Jude in the second half of the first century AD. committed of "*contending for the faith once and for all entrusted to the saints*"<sup>29</sup>, as evidenced by the text that follows. Specifically based on this reading, we realize that the Church and her teachers at this time began to reject some of the sacred writings of the apostles and to accept the Gnostic (heretical) texts as inspired by God:

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<sup>26</sup> See Acts 10:3-7, 9-16, 19, 13:1, 16:6-7, 18:9, 21:7, 9-11; also 1 Cor. 12:10, 14:4-5.

<sup>27</sup> See Acts 20:28-30.

<sup>28</sup> See Colossians 2:4, 2 Thess. 2:2-5, 2 Tim. 2:16-18.

<sup>29</sup> Jude 3.

“This was the Roman view: the Epistle to the Hebrews is not located in the Muratorian Canon, and neither was it accepted by Saints Hippolytus, Gaius, and Novitian. A similar view was held by the African churches. Tertullian quoted the Epistle to the Hebrews only once, which he claims Barnabas wrote (De pudic. 20). Indeed, the first Western writer who considered Hebrews as a canonical book was Hilary of Poitiers (died 367 A.D.). On the other hand, the Epistle to the Hebrews was highly esteemed by the churches in Alexandria and elsewhere in the East. Pantaenus (2nd century) thought that the Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle anonymously so as not to cause controversy amongst the Jewish audience... St. Clement proposed that the Apostle Paul wrote the work in Hebrew and gave it to Luke to translate it into Greek... **In the West considerable confusion reigned at the end of the 4th century.** Philastrius, Bishop of Brescia (died 397) held to Pauline authorship but denied its canonicity. Yet African synods held in 393 and 397 affirmed the canonicity of the ‘thirteen epistles of Paul’ and ‘the one addressed to the Hebrews’, which distinguishes Hebrews from the rest but does not separate it... In the earliest period for which we have data - the second century - the Christian writers only used the First Epistles of Peter and John (although sometimes they included 2 John as a portion of 1 John). This view is upheld in the 3rd century by Saints Hippolytus, Novitian, Cyprian, and Origen, but several participants in church synods put them in doubt (cited by Eusebius, beginning of the 4th century). Later on, only two epistles proposed by the synods were accepted by Diodorus of Tarsus (died about 394) and Nestorius (died 451)... A complete list can be obtained from the writings of Origen as he accepted all seven church synods, but he expressed his doubts about James, Judah and II Peter, as did the historian Eusebius. However, the majority of Greek writers in the fourth century had doubts about some of these epistles, and their opinion prevailed both in the West and the East, with the exception of Syria. Syria gave its response to the enlarged canon in the *Doctrine of Addai* and in the writings of Epiphanius and Ephraim the Syrian, all from the mid-4th century. These writings did not accept the catholic epistle, while the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia also expressed doubt. Even in the sixth century, the Greek traveler Cosmas Indicopleustes shared this view. A middle ground was taken by John Chrysostom, the first patriarch of Antioch and later Constantinople (died 407), and his student Theodoret of Cyprus (died 458): the collection of the Epistles of James, 1 Peter, and 1 John. A similar view is reflected in the Syrian translation of the Holy Scriptures known as Peshitta, which Cosmas mentioned... **The Revelation of John is treasured by almost all writers of the second century that we know... In the fourth century, all the Eastern writers outside of Alexandria rejected Revelation.** In the fifth century, west Syrian writers accepted it, but eastern Syrian writers never accepted it, so far as we know. And in the ninth century, many Greek-speaking Christians still had doubts about Revelation... **Apocryphal books were sometimes read in churches and otherwise considered authoritative.** Around 190 AD Serapion, Bishop of Antioch, had trouble debunking the so-called Pseudo-Gospel of Peter. Professor Morton Smith claims to have discovered fragments allegedly by St. Clement that argues for the existence of a ‘secret Gospel of Mark’. Hippolytus and Origen used the ‘Acts of Paul’.”<sup>30</sup>

As we can conclude after all the information presented on these previous pages, even those men whom Orthodoxy today esteems and respects today as “holy” and “blessed” not only failed to arrive at a positive and unequivocal determination of the canon of the New Testament, but they also openly presented mutually contradictory views about the various writings of Biblical inspiration. In various parts of the Roman Empire they preserved and read various works of unknown authors, and furthermore they respected them as quite authoritative.

However, the earlier quotation from Radomir Rakic states that Christians in the era after the death of the original apostles were reluctant to deny the Apocryphal gospels. One

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<sup>30</sup> *St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, Vol. 1-2, No. 29-30 (Prizren, 2000), 94-7. Author’s emphasis.

clear example is the “Gospel of Thomas”, which they were not willing to reject, even though they could see that it was full of Gnosticism.<sup>31</sup> What is even more interesting to mention at this point, which subsequent chapters and arguments will support, is that today’s Orthodox Church has adopted many of its beliefs and defends them based on ancient apocryphal texts that are not in the New Testament. This situation pertains especially to the details of the birth and life of Mary, mother of Jesus, as described in the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James (written in the second century AD), which contains many legends that cannot be substantiated from the original apostolic texts. Similarly, the so-called “Gospel of the Hebrews”, “Gospel of the Egyptians”, and the “Gospel of Thomas” contain certain Gnostic ideas of the greatness of celibacy. It is not surprising at all that Christian monasticism sprouted only in Egypt, since these “gospels” proliferated there. But what I particularly wish to emphasize is the fact that today’s Orthodox authors, without any excuse, dare to claim that there is nothing heretical about any of the Apocryphal books inserted in the New Testament canon. In other words, their opinion is that Christians can read these books as healthy material for religious instruction. If this were not the case, then one would have to prove it by citing details from the apocryphal “Gospel of Nicodemus”, which was written in the third century. Artemis, the Bishop of Raska and Prizren, said, amongst other things, in the publication of the diocesan magazine *St. Lazarus the Prince*:

“Some of these apocryphal accounts are written to ‘fill’ the gap which actually exists in the presentation of the lives of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament do not contain many details that **pious folk** desire to learn, especially about the childhood of Jesus Christ... Before us we see the Gospel of Nicodemus in the translation by Professor Tomislav Jovanovic, who **with rich imagination** describes in detail the trial and suffering of Christ the Lord, but not his life. The meditation of simple and pious souls on this type of literature bears witness to the fact that today over 180 Slavic translations of the Gospel of Nicodemus exist.

**Because it has nothing heretical, we introduce it to our readers.**”<sup>32</sup>

Comparing the narratives that were written in the New Testament (in other words, the canonical Gospel written by the Apostles) with the tales in the Gospel of Nicodemus, which arose more than two centuries after these events occurred, one can see a major difference between them. Serious contradictions arise from the accounts of the New Testament compared to those of the apocryphal “Nicodemus,” which themselves discredit statements from those like the Orthodox bishop that “it has nothing heretical.” Indeed, we can only conclude that the early Church was correct to reject apocryphal writings such as the Gospel of Nicodemus in which we have no basis for confidence.

The “Gospel of Nicodemus” contains several historical inaccuracies. First of all, in this “gospel” is written to the Jews in the presence of Pontius Pilate with the following accusations:

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<sup>31</sup> More detail about Gnosticism and its influence on contemporary belief can be found in the chapter on “Ecumenical Councils”.

<sup>32</sup> *St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Prizren 1995), 170. Author’s emphasis.

“The Jews said to Pilate, ‘He said he could destroy the temple and after three days He would rebuild it.’ Pilate answered, ‘Which temple?’ The Jews responded, ‘Our **temple which Solomon took 46 years to build**, and this man says he will destroy it in three days.’”<sup>33</sup>

The author of Nicodemus has committed at least two mistakes in this passage alone. The first error consists of his ignorance of the Old Testament history, which clearly states that Solomon built God's temple in Jerusalem in only seven years and six months, not forty-six years as stated previously. The Old Testament Book of 1 Kings declares:

*“And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, **in the fourth year** of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD... And **in the eleventh year**, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, the house was finished in all its details and according to all its plans. **So he was seven years in building it.**”*<sup>34</sup>

Based on his misunderstanding of the date of the building of the temple, yet another misunderstanding comes related to the New Testament Gospel of John. Here is the actual dialogue between Jesus and his religious opponents:

*“So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘**It has taken forty-six years to build this temple**, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.”*<sup>35</sup>

Apart from this text, nowhere else does the New Testament state that it took Solomon forty six years to build the temple. At first glance, this passage would seem to stand in contradiction with the Old Testament. However, the Bible can never contradict itself because it is the Word of God completely inspired and infallible. So how do we resolve the issue that the passage in John tells us that the Jews believed it took 46 years to build the temple in Jerusalem?

The issue becomes clear once we realize that the Jews were referring to the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem, not its initial construction by Solomon. The restoration of the temple was initiated by Herod the Great in 20 BC and continued until 64 AD (in reality, a total of 80 years).<sup>36</sup> Since the event described by John occurred in the first year of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ when He was 30 years old (Luke 3:23), this implies a chronology somewhere in 26-27 AD (with Christ having been born around 4 or 5 BC). Therefore, it is clear that the Jews in John 2 are referring to the reconstruction of the temple under Herod, not the initial construction of the temple under Solomon. Up to the time of John 2, in fact, the duration of the reconstruction lasted exactly 46 years.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 178. Author's emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Kings 6:1, 38. Author's emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> John 2:18-21. Author's emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> Morris, Leon, *New Testament Commentary on the Gospel of John*, (Good News: Novi Sad, 1984), 165, and footnote on John 2:20 in *The NIV Study Bible 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2005), 1594.



It becomes obvious that the writer of this apocryphal “gospel” was really imaginative when he wrote down this text. The following quotation demonstrates that this “gospel” not only contradicts the substance of the true gospel given to the Apostles, but it also represents an unusual teaching found nowhere in the apostolic records. This is an excerpt from a letter allegedly sent to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Caesar on the occasion of the events in Judea and related to the suffering and resurrection from the dead of Jesus of Nazareth:

“But Herod and Archelaus and Philip, Annas and Caiaphas, with all the people, delivered him to me, making a great tumult against me in order that I might try him. Therefore, I commanded him to be crucified, when I had first whipped him, though I found no cause in him for evil accusations or dealings. **Now when he was crucified, there was darkness over all the world, and the sun was obscured for half a day, and the stars appeared, but no light was seen in them; and the moon lost its brightness, as though tinged with blood; and the world of the departed (Hades) was swallowed up,** so that the very sanctuary of the temple, as they call it, did not appear to the Jews themselves at their fall, but they perceived a chasm in the earth and the rolling of successive thunders. And amid this terror **the dead appeared rising again,** as the Jews themselves bore witness and said **that it was Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs, and Moses, and Job, who had died before, as they say, some three thousand five hundred years.** And there were very many whom I myself saw appearing in the body, and they made lamentation over the Jews, because of the transgression which was committed by them, and because of the destruction of the Jews and of their law. The terror of the earthquake continued from the sixth hour of the preparation until the ninth hour; and when it was evening on the first day of the week, there came a sound from heaven, and the heaven became seven times more luminous than on all other days. And at the third hour of the night the sun appeared more luminous than it had ever shone, lighting up the whole hemisphere. And as lightning-flashes suddenly come forth in a storm, so there were seen men, lofty in stature and surpassing in glory, a countless host crying out, and their voice was heard as that of exceedingly loud thunder: Jesus that was crucified is risen again. **Come up from Hades, you that were enslaved in the subterranean recesses of Hades.** And the chasm in the earth was as if it had no bottom, but it was so that the very foundations of the earth appeared, with those that shouted in heaven, and walked in the body among the dead that were raised. And he who raised up all the dead and bound in Hades said, Say to my disciples, he goes before you into Galilee, and there you will see him. And all that night the light did not cease shining. And many of the Jews died in the chasm of the earth, being swallowed up, so that in the morning most of those who had been against Jesus were not to be found. Others saw the apparition of men rising again whom none of us had ever seen. Only one synagogue of the Jews was left in Jerusalem itself, for they all disappeared in that ruin. Therefore being astounded by that terror, and being possessed with the most dreadful trembling, I have written what I saw at that time and sent it to Your Excellency; and I have inserted what was done against Jesus by the Jews, and sent it to your divinity, My Lord.”<sup>37</sup>

As you can see, anyone who reads the Gospels of the New Testament canon will realize that most of the incidents recounted in the above text simply do not match anything in the Gospels of Christ's apostles. The sentences I have emphasized in bold are striking conflicts with the accounts inspired by God. Let us take a look at a few examples.

We are struck by the alleged claim that an eclipse of the sun during the crucifixion of Christ. (We can read this text from page 184 of this “gospel”: “And it was about the sixth hour during the day when darkness from the eclipse of the sun covered the whole country until the ninth hour.”) The passage continues that at the same time, the moon

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<sup>37</sup>*St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Prizren 1995), 197. Author's emphasis. (See also <http://www.orthodox.cn/patristics/apostolicfathers/herpilat.htm> . Translator's note.)

turned to the color of blood. Although this report apparently concurs with what we read in the gospel (Matt. 27:45), the apocryphal text emphasizes that it was an ordinary eclipse of the sun. This is despite the issue that it would not be possible to see the color of the moon (since we know that a solar eclipse occurs when the moon is partially or fully covered). In other words, the apocryphal writer seems to have confused a solar with a lunar eclipse (when at times the moon can appear red to us).<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand, although the Scripture reports of earthquakes and the splitting of rocks at the time of Jesus' death (Matt. 27:51), it says nothing about the "appearance of the abyss," which revealed an "underground Hades." On the other hand, although Scripture mentions the resurrection of many dead Old Testament saints at the moment of Christ's death (or maybe at the time of His resurrection – see Mt. 27:52-53), Scripture says nothing about the resurrection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob nor of the Old Testament prophets - something about which the apostles undoubtedly would have written, had it actually occurred. It is important also to cite the problem with the view that the death of the Old Testament saints occurred "three thousand five hundred years" before Jesus' time. Historically, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived between 2000-1800 BC, in other words, roughly 2000 years before Christ, not the 3500 years mentioned in "Nicodemus". Furthermore, 3500 BC is the period which is chronologically placed at the time before flood, several hundred years after the creation of the world – a time that God describes as one of great lawlessness. It was impossible to see "many righteous saints" in this time (Gen. 6:6-7, 13). Christ's apostles (the evangelists) also do not mention the issue that "the earth shook from the sixth to ninth hours on Friday "(i.e. the whole three hours), but rather only at the time of Christ's death (Mt. 27:50-51).

Great imagination also reveals itself in the story of the appearance of a large host of angels which brightened the Saturday night before Jesus' resurrection (in other words, the night was seven times brighter than a typical sunny day!!!). If something like this had truly occurred, then all the apostles would have had borne witness to the events. Their confidence lost when Christ died would have been immediately restored when He resurrected.

But in fact, this did not transpire in the apostolic Gospels. Early on Sunday morning, after receiving the first news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead,<sup>39</sup> the apostles responded with unbelief (Mark 16:9-13). Neither do the New Testament Gospels mention anything about a really wonderful light on the eve of the resurrection of Christ, nor anything close to the brightest day in world history. According to this apocryphal account, Pontius Pilate believed in the resurrection of Christ one day before the apostles did. According to the New Testament, this assertion is impossible. Neither the Bible nor science lend support to the idea of the afterlife as represented by the "appearance of an

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<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.mreclipse.com/Special/LEprimer.html> . (Translator's note.)

<sup>39</sup> The apostle John in his gospel says that the women went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint His dead body. This is clear evidence that neither they nor the other disciples of Jesus were convinced of His impending resurrection. The fact that they went to His tomb before sunrise in the darkness also demonstrates that the apostolic gospels make no mention of the bright light claimed by the apocryphal account in Nicodemus. (John 20:1)

underground abyss to Hades" in the Apocryphal Nicodemus. There is no basis to believe that an angel could call out the immaterial souls of righteous men to depart from Hades and ascend to Heaven. Neither is there any mention in the Scriptures of a great opponent who failed to overcome Christ as He died and opened the depths of the great hellish abyss...

As the evidence demonstrates, the so-called "Gospel of Nicodemus" yields a text that gives phony information about the authenticity of its authorship.<sup>40</sup> Further doubt is justified by the fact that this apocryphal gospel was written long after the death of the historical Nicodemus of the first century.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the distribution of this phony "gospel" is dangerous because it propagates so much historical inaccuracy and religious doctrinal error. We kindly disagree with the assessment by Bishop Artemis that there is "nothing heretical" about the so-called "Gospel of Nicodemus". Indeed, we praise the Lord that He prevented this fake document from being included among the sacred books of the New Testament.

"The Gospel of Nicodemus" was only one of an almost boundless variety of heretical apocryphal writings that some of the "Church Fathers" used as canonical and inspired by God. Although the task of distinguishing which books truly came from the apostles versus those that were faked might seem difficult, nonetheless, it was not that difficult for the teachers of the church living during those times to use clear discernment. We have already seen from these few sentences in the "Gospel of Nicodemus" that a big difference exists between the false gospels from the true apostolic texts. Now just imagine what other heresies we would find in some of the other apocryphal texts. For example, let us see what heresies other apocryphal books teach, such as the "Gospel of Thomas":

- The Lord Jesus had sexual relations with Mary Magdalene.
- Women could only attain salvation by being transformed into men.
- Jesus did not really die on the cross because He did not possess a human body.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The writer of this apocryphal work falsely attributes the authorship of his work to Nicodemus, a follower of Jesus. "And Nicodemus, an elder of the Jews, wrote this book and spoke to Pilate as he stood before the Jewish scribes..." *St. Lazarus the Prince: The Magazine for Spiritual Revival*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Prizren, 1995), 179.

<sup>41</sup> Proof that this "gospel" was written long after the death of the actual Nicodemus is found in the apocryphal text. Specifically on page 199 of *St. Lazarus the Prince* the conclusion says that (which is also historically inaccurate) the Roman Caesar chose to execute the Jews who sought the death of Jesus because they crucified Him. Thus, Caesar ordered the Roman legions to go and enslave the land of Judah. The legionnaires fulfilled Caesar's commandment. The apocryphal gospel states: "And then he gathered a large army, conquered the entire Jewish race, and dispersed them among the Gentiles, as is the case today." (The historical event of the Roman conquest of Jewish territory under the leadership of the Roman generals Titus and Vespasian occurred during the famous "Wars of the Jews" waged in 66-73 AD. The final scattering of the Jews, however, followed their uprising against the Romans led by the false Messiah Bar Kohba in 135. The phrase "as is the case today" points to the fact that Jews had already been dispersed for a long time as of the writing of "Nicodemus" (third century, a long time after the death of the historical and biblical Nicodemus in the first century).

<sup>42</sup> Translator's note: this argument is used by Muslim apologists to propound the view that the Bible never taught that Jesus died on the cross for our sins nor rose from the dead. They confuse the Holy Bible with manmade inventions from the apocryphal gospels. See [http://www.answering-islam.org/Intro/islamic\\_jesus.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/Intro/islamic_jesus.html).

- There is God the Father and God the Mother.
- Jesus had a twin brother named Thomas.
- There is no such thing as “resurrection of the dead”, and others.<sup>43 44</sup>

Beyond a doubt, one can see the apocryphal gospels have nothing “similar” to the apostolic Gospels that “broke ground” in the first centuries of Christianity. Furthermore, this perspective should help one to see through the great dilemmas surrounding power in the church in past history.

What also becomes quite obvious is that almost every work of the Apocrypha was written after the death of Christ's apostles, i.e., from the second century AD and afterwards. On the other hand, the texts composed by the hands of Christ's apostles that we have today in the New Testament were written in the second half of the first century AD. These apostolic texts contain God's message of what is necessary for salvation and for how a Christian should live his life to please Him. Therefore, the New Testament was recognized by the Apostolic Church of Christ of the first century AD, not by the Orthodox Church, which dares to claim that it “gave” us the New Testament only because the “Holy Fathers” defined the canon. However, as we have seen already, the “Church Fathers” could not agree amongst themselves what comprised the New Testament – which books were authentic as opposed to which were heretical fakes – until the tenth century AD. They created unneeded confusion for nearly one thousand years after the resurrection of Christ and the completion of the writings of the Apostles!

If we take a reality check, we can conclude that the Orthodox Church has indeed created its version of “Holy Scripture,” only not the New Testament that God gave to us, but rather a “new” version of its own “Bible”. In fact, as I previously demonstrated, to this day, Eastern Orthodoxy is not clear as to which books should or should not be recognized as canonical in the Old Testament. It also includes the Old Testament Apocrypha and respects them as “inspired by God”. Based on such theology, the Orthodox Church has invented a new canon of “scripture”, one that neither the Lord Christ nor His apostles know nor from which they ever quoted. Even regarding the New Testament, despite claims that its righteous "Holy Fathers" formed the canon of Christian writings and rejected Apocrypha, the Orthodox Church bases a significant part of its church teachings on those very Apocrypha!<sup>45</sup> The exaltation of Mary as “the Mother of God” comes from the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James,<sup>46</sup> a work that the “Fathers” rejected. Many other examples abound.

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<sup>43</sup> Translator's note: how ironic that Orthodox church leaders protest a fictional book (and movie) by Dan Brown called *The DaVinci Code* that repeats some of these very heresies from apocryphal heresies such as the “Gospel of Thomas”. Yet, Orthodox churches insist believers can read these books because they contain “nothing heretical”! See [www.goarch.org/news/goa.news1580](http://www.goarch.org/news/goa.news1580).

<sup>44</sup> More information about the apocryphal pseudo-texts can be found in the chapter on “Ecumenical Councils”.

<sup>45</sup> Most likely, their leaders defend their stance with the pretense, “There is nothing heretical in it.”

<sup>46</sup> The famous Orthodox theologian Justin Popovic acknowledges that a lot of Orthodox doctrine originates from the Apocryphal gospels. “By this ‘proclamation’ (Author's note: Popovic refers to the history of the birth of Jesus Christ), you can learn various details about the birth of Christ the Lord, which are not

Thus, it is obvious that the Orthodox Church does not consider the books included in the New Testament canon as sufficient on which to base her doctrine. Indeed, de facto, Eastern Orthodoxy has expanded the very source of doctrine beyond the Holy Scriptures which God gave to humankind.

### God Inspired Only 66 Books!

The Scriptures in the pages of the Old and New Testaments stand in the highest place of authority. This absolute supremacy means that God categorically forbids any addition or subtraction to the revelation which He declared through his servants, the prophets and apostles. Therefore, by no means does the Lord permit his Church to teach and practice doctrines that stem from heretical apocryphal texts. Such prohibitions were clearly spelled out during the times of the composition of both the Old and the New Testaments. These verses demonstrate this prohibition:

*“Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.”<sup>47</sup>*

*“Do not add to His words, or He will rebuke you and prove you a liar.”<sup>48</sup>*

*“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”<sup>49</sup>*

God's testimony is clear. If some earthly mortal and corrupt creature dares to add or take away even just a single letter of the Word of God (and thus attempting to perfect the Word of the All Perfect God which is able to perfect those who are imperfect), it is quite certain that he will face eternal damnation, consisting of the Lake of Fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The Lord testified that His word has always been and will remain eternity constant and absolutely unchangeable:

*“Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.”<sup>50</sup>*

And, as I said, simply because God's Word is eternal and earthly man is mortal, man is prone to committing error. But he cannot afford to do this when it comes to God's Holy Scripture as it pertains to the texts inspired by God or its interpretation. He must not add

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included in the (New Testament) Gospels. **Almost all of these details derive from the so-called ‘Apocryphal’ gospels...** This account derives primarily from the ‘Protogospel of James’, which is undoubtedly the oldest monument of apocryphal literature." *Lives of the Saints*, December 25, 722.

Emphasis is mine.

<sup>47</sup> Deut. 4:2. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> Proverbs 30:6. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Rev.22:18-19. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> Ps.119:89. (NIV)

or subtract a single word that it does not intend. The Lord specifically told the prophet Isaiah:

*“A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’  
‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. **The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.**”<sup>51</sup>*

We see that the Bible with its 66 books is the only writing that God has inspired, the only source that Christians are obliged to accept as the sole authority for their faith (without additional "revelations" that come from apocryphal or later ecclesiastical authority). We can see the truth more clearly through the verses already cited. The Psalms speak of the Scriptures as standing “firm in the heavens”<sup>52</sup> and “standing forever.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps we can understand more clearly why the Lord Jesus Christ had such immeasurable confidence in the fulfillment of each letter recorded in the Old Testament<sup>54</sup>, or why He was convinced to state that "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away."<sup>55</sup>

So if it were ever possible for God, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, to accept any of the apocryphal texts, which more or less fall short in giving accurate information about Christ and his life, into the canon of Holy Scripture, then the last words of Jesus would have been rendered meaningless! However, instead, the Lord Christ as Eternal God did not allow false books and thus upholds His Word. He sent His Holy Spirit to inspire His servants to write the perfect words, has Even as we are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we possess the authoritative and secure source for answering all the questions of the Christian faith and proper ecclesiastical practice. The Apostle Peter, just as the Lord Jesus Christ did,<sup>56</sup> warned Christians to adhere to the whole teaching of the Bible, so that they would learn how to avoid the risk of being deceived by false teachers who seek to deceive God's elect:

*“And we have **the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.**”<sup>57</sup>*

If the Bible which we now know and possess in the Serbian language had ever been added to or corrupted in even one word, the whole system that was established by God with its delicate structure would be irreparably compromised. Praise God that He has given us His Word intact!

So now let us turn to a different topic: the Eastern Orthodox teaching on "sacred tradition" and to examine its vital role as the source for Orthodox belief and practice, even in direct opposition to the Word of God in Holy Scripture. In fact, we will see that

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<sup>51</sup> Is.40:6-8. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> Ps.119:89. (NIV)

<sup>53</sup> Is.40:8. (NIV)

<sup>54</sup> Mt.5:18. (NIV)

<sup>55</sup> Mt.24:35. (NIV)

<sup>56</sup> Mt.24:24. (NIV)

<sup>57</sup> 2 Pet.1:19. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

“sacred tradition” denies many obvious teachings from the Bible and adds other teachings that have no connection whatsoever to the Lord’s direct revelation.

## What Is “Sacred Tradition”?

The Orthodox Church explains this concept in this manner:

“Sacred Tradition includes the following: the oral teachings of Jesus Christ, lectures, and other events in the history of the gospel. The church exists in parallel with the Scriptures and **adds to them...** but things that are not recorded in the Gospels. John the Evangelist states that if a list of everything in detail had been compiled, the world would not be able to preserve these books. (John 21:25) Many events are still transmitted by spoken word (and not through the written Scriptures). For example the Scriptures do not contain stories about the Mother of God, including her birth, her presentation at the temple, and her glorious Assumption.”<sup>58</sup>

“What is Sacred Tradition? It includes all of the spiritual treasures that we inherited from our holy ancestors, and **which are in perfect harmony with the Holy Scriptures**, and thus help us to correctly understand Scripture. Which is older, Holy Scripture or Holy Tradition? Holy Tradition. Which is greater? Holy Tradition. St. John the Evangelist confirms this, saying: ‘Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.’ (Jn.21:25).”<sup>59</sup>

“Sacred Tradition includes:

1. Brief articulation and formulation of our Orthodox faith;
2. Doctrines of the seven holy Sacraments, and the order in which they are performed;
3. Apostolic laws (canons);
4. The dogmas (canons) of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, which include:
  - I. Nicaea in 325 A.D. with 318 holy fathers
  - II. Constantinople in 381 A.D. with 150 holy fathers
  - III. Ephesus in 431 A.D. with 200 holy fathers
  - IV. Chalcedon in 451 A.D. with 630 holy fathers
  - V. Constantinople in 533 A.D. with 160 holy fathers
  - VI. Constantinople in 680 A.D. with 170 holy fathers, and
  - VII. Nicaea in 787 A.D. with 367 holy fathers.(A total of 2,000 representatives of Christian churches from around the world attended these Seven Ecumenical Councils);
5. Canons and rules of the local synod, or council;
6. Laws of church discipline as put forth by St. Basil the Great and other saints;
7. Writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church;
8. Liturgy and other religious worship;
9. Christian hagiographies of saints and martyrs;
10. Pious customs, meanings, and symbols as expressions of our faith, hope and love.”<sup>60</sup>

In a nutshell, Eastern Orthodoxy believes that Sacred Tradition precedes the Holy Scriptures. It believes that Holy Tradition is older than, embellishes, and even is consistent with Holy Scripture (specifically the New Testament). Of course, it is not very difficult to compare the texts of the Bible with Orthodox tradition to determine whether they agree with one another. That is to ascertain if they agree in all matters (not just some) of Christian faith. What this means firstly and most importantly is that if “Sacred Tradition” is actually true, then it must fully correspond to the teachings of ancient times, two thousand years ago, that were written in the holy texts of the Apostolic Church of the

<sup>58</sup> *Orthodox Religion* (The Voice of the Church: Valjevo, 1990) 23-24. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>59</sup> Bishop Nikolai, *The Holy Faith*, (Sabac: 1988) 21-22. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-4.



first century, which we call Holy Scripture. The God-inspired books of the Old and New Testament, which were written by over forty writers during the extended time period of over 1500 years, contain not a single contradiction in their teachings and declarations. In spite of their differing educational, personal, national, and intellectual backgrounds, the apostles of Christ under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote the New Testament books over the course of fifty years (in the second half of the first century AD) and did not contradict each other in any way.

However, as we shall easily see by comparing the Word of God with "Sacred Tradition", in fact, Orthodox doctrine makes many statements of dogma that do not even come close to reflecting the teachings of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament. However, before we proceed to compare these two sources of faith (contained in subsequent chapters of the book), let us pause and look at some quotations by Eastern Orthodox theologians who attempt to prove that the early Christian communities honored the traditions that today's Eastern Orthodox churches uphold.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Lazar Milin attempts to show that Scripture affirms that we should also believe in Holy Tradition to which Orthodoxy subscribes. He highlights the following Bible verses: John 21:25, 1 Cor.11:2, 2 Thes.2:15; 1 Tim. 6:20, and 2 Tim. 2:2. Milin, Lazar, *The Scientific Justification of Religion, Church, and Cult*, 160.

## The New Testament Concept of “Tradition”

The apostolic writings of the New Testament contain several references to the word "tradition". When Jesus Christ used the term “tradition” in the Gospels (Mt.15, Mk.7), He always viewed it in a negative light. In these passages, Christ condemned the Jewish religious leaders for their manmade traditions. He made it very clear that their upholding and adhering to the traditions of their ancestors abrogated the commandments of God revealed in His Word. Thus, it follows that the Jewish “tradition” was contradictory to the Holy Scriptures (at that time, only the Old Testament) and in direct opposition. Jesus declared that people who held to this manmade tradition rendered religion to God that was useless as it was based merely upon human commands and worldly wisdom, rather on God's Word.

The word “tradition” appears several times in the apostolic epistles: 1 Cor. 11:2, 23 and 15:3, 2 Thess.2:15 and 3:6, Gal.1:14, and Col.2:8.

### The Epistle to the Galatians

*“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for **the traditions of my fathers.**”<sup>62</sup>*

The previous verses say nothing about legends that describe events in the Orthodox confession such as the Mother of God etc. about which the apostles would have known, but had not written down. In fact, when the apostle Paul refers to “tradition” in the Galatian epistle, he views it in an extremely negative context relative to the Gospel of Christ. He justifies his opposition to “tradition” because his extreme zeal and ancestral customs were blind to the actual spiritual reality that encircled them.

### The Epistle to the Colossians

When the same apostle in Colossians mentions this term, he sternly warns faithful Christians to abstain from false knowledge and philosophy that arise from human speculation (tradition) to the detriment of true knowledge of the Gospel. Paul described this “tradition” that was present in the first century and was being spread by false “new apostles” as “vain deceit”:

*“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and **empty deceit**, according to **human tradition**, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”<sup>63</sup>*

Among other false teachings, this tradition obligated Christians to worship and serve angels, instead of exclusively the only true God.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Gal.1:13-14. (NIV) Author’s emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> Col.2:8. (NIV) Author’s emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Col.2:18.

## The First Epistle to the Corinthians

However, the remaining verses that speak of tradition (1 Cor.11:2, 23, and 15:3, 2 Thes.2:15, 3:6) suggest that the apostle Paul regarded this subject in a positive light under certain circumstances. Specifically, during the first twenty years of the Christian Church in the decade of the fifties of the first century, the apostles preached the gospel by the spoken word that was not written down. With the constantly increasing number of Christians and churches established in many cities of the Roman Empire, there also appeared at the same time false teachers who denied the Lord's teaching. The apostles needed to record the true teachings of Christ to be spread throughout the New Testament communities. As such, during the first two decades of the growth of Christianity, the apostles were preaching and teaching their disciples the Christian faith via the spoken word. Thus, when the apostle Paul mentions the word "tradition" in the Epistle to the Corinthians, he reminds the local believers of the earlier preaching that they heard while he was still among them:

*"Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and **hold firmly to the traditions**, just as I delivered them to you."*<sup>65</sup>

*"For I **received** from the Lord that which I **also delivered** to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread..."*<sup>66</sup>

*"Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also **received**, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,<sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day<sup>1</sup> according to the Scriptures..."*<sup>67</sup>

As the writer of this epistle was not one of the original twelve apostles and thus did not personally witness Christ's death and resurrection, Paul notes that which he has made known to them (acceptance by faith) is what he himself received (the knowledge and belief) of others. In fact, Paul in other chapters of this epistle repeats the content of what he preached to the Corinthian believers several years ago. Apparently, some were disturbing the faith of others by saying that there was no resurrection from the dead (verses 11-19), probably under the influence of Greek thought and religion, which Paul rejected.

In Orthodox literature, among other examples, one can read statements like the following that attempt to prove that the apostles obligate modern believers to keep the Orthodox tradition:

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<sup>65</sup> 1 Cor.11:1-2. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

<sup>66</sup> 1 Cor.11:23. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> 1 Cor.15:4. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

“The New Testament **commands** (1 Tim. 6:20, 2 Tim.2:2) and **praises** (1 Cor. 11: 2) us to adhere and preserve the Holy Tradition.”<sup>68</sup>

Milan Vukomanović, a sociologist of religion, however, correctly states the view that the term “tradition” which the apostles mention in no way could equate to the “tradition” of which the “Church Fathers” and contemporary Orthodox believers speak:

“Of course, it is important to notice that which the apostle [Paul] calls the oral tradition of preaching is a tradition that should be kept in mind. Seven centuries after this Pauline epistle, the Byzantine scholar John of Damascus in his discourse on icons stated that the original meaning of “tradition” is remembrance, even collective memory. According to John of Damascus, tradition touches on eternal borders, and thus remains permanent and unchanging. However, the content of the Christian tradition in the first century, in Paul's time, is not the same as the tradition in the eighth century... **When Paul refers to Tradition, he has in mind only the oral preaching of Jesus, His death and resurrection, the sacrament of baptism, some rudimentary form of the Eucharist, and the Old Testament.** On the other hand, when John of Damascus speaks of Tradition, he refers to many different elements, or layers, of Christian tradition, including the New, not just the Old, Testament, the Nicene Creed and dogma of the Trinity, religious and political precedents, at least six Ecumenical Councils, developed forms of the liturgy, the Eucharist, of church fathers, and finally, the icons - "unofficial", but in John's time, a widely prevalent form of Orthodox worship.”<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, the "praise" that he gives to the Corinthian believers for keeping the traditions applies only to their memories of Paul's exemplary Christian life and his earlier sermons preached on various spiritual truths, as the text clearly shows (11:1-2). However, although this apostle ended up writing more than what he had previously taught by the spoken word, we find nothing that would contradict or add superfluous details to the gospel narratives and the teachings of Jesus. Legends such as the “Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple” were communicated to, but not necessarily accepted by, believers of other churches.

## **The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians**

The other two verses penned and verbally stated by the first teacher of the Church clearly reject the possibility that they include the present Eastern Orthodox traditions of Christianity. In the first verse, the apostle Paul encourages believers in Thessalonica to stand firm and steadfast in their faith by directing them to adhere to what they have learned from his spoken words in preaching and the letter which he along with his assistants wrote them a few years earlier (which we call the first epistle to the Thessalonians):

*“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the **traditions which you were taught**, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.”*<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Text of Branislav Peranovic, in *The Bible without God, Christianity without the Church*, (Cetynje: 1997), 27. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>69</sup> Milan Vukomanović, *Early Christianity of Jesus Christ*, (Worlds: Novi Sad, 1996) 289-90. Author's emphasis.

<sup>70</sup> 2 Thess. 2:15. (NIV) Author's emphasis.

This was of particular importance because the Thessalonians, like other Christians throughout the Roman Empire, did not have the complete revelation of God in written form from which they could learn (unlike believers in later centuries up to today). At that time, circulation of different interpretations of the original evangelical messages and letters (epistles) to the churches also included works of unknown authors who attempted to falsify the signatures of the apostles. However, their heresies found reception among new believers. Such traditions and epistles had a very negative effect on the stability of spiritual individuals and churches and ruined the faith of many. Several examples of this situation occur in the New Testament:

*“...that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.”<sup>71</sup>*

*“But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus...”<sup>72</sup>*

It is obvious based on these verses that we have no basis to conclude that Paul leads believers to keep the memory of the traditions of the Virgin Mary and saints. Rather, he exhorts believers to uphold the fundamental truths of New Testament Christianity such as the resurrection of the dead and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The final passage that mentions the word "tradition" is also found in Second Thessalonians, which states:

*“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to **the tradition** which you received from us.”<sup>73</sup>*

As is obvious from the very verse and its entire context, Paul gives instructions to this early community of exemplary Christian living, which, unfortunately, not everyone obeyed. Specifically, some people wanted to freeload at the expense of their brothers and sisters of faith and refused to work or be productive (verses 7-12). So the Apostle repeats his warning again in writing which he had previously spoken to them in the form of “oral tradition” (verse 10):

*“For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.”<sup>74</sup>*

### **The Verse Most Frequently Quoted by Supporters of “Sacred Tradition”**

Finally, I want to address the verse most often quoted by Orthodox authors that try to misrepresent its meaning in order to rationalize their confession. The specific text is in the last chapter of the Gospel of John:

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<sup>71</sup> 2 Thess. 2:2. (NIV) Author’s emphasis.

<sup>72</sup> 2 Tim. 2:16-7. (NIV)

<sup>73</sup> 2 Thess. 3:6. (NIV) Author’s emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> 2 Thess. 3:10.

*“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”<sup>75</sup>*

This verse is a favorite among Orthodox theologians. In their view, this verse would seem to demonstrate evidence that even the apostles would uphold the historicity and veracity of traditions that comprise the dogma of Eastern Orthodoxy. These traditions will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. However, in addition to the verse in John previously mentioned, there is yet another passage that is generally ignored and cleverly circumvented by Orthodox theologians. They avoid it because this passage undermines their alleged proof. This passage states:

*“Jesus did **many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples**, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”<sup>76</sup>*

The meaning of these verses, like of the one from the twenty-first chapter, are more than clear even for the reader who is reading the Bible for the first time. It does not require deep analysis to figure out what these verses do not say. The only thing that these texts emphasize is that Jesus did **more deeds and miracles** during His earthly ministry before the apostles that ended with His ascension than is recorded in the gospels. The apostle John emphasizes these words: *“which are not recorded **in this book**”<sup>77</sup>* which convey the idea of the book that he just recorded which we call the Gospel of John. John himself in his gospel recorded many less miraculous works of Christ than did the other evangelists. For example, John mentioned fewer than ten of Christ's miracles in his report, which certainly represents a drop in the ocean of miraculous events related to the Savior's life. Therefore, if the honest reader of the Bible wants to know about more of the miracles that John did not record, he should read the other Gospels. What is more interesting to mention is that John says the following:

*“Jesus did many other things as well. **If every one of them were written down**, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”<sup>78</sup>*

The fact is that when we read the four gospels, we find many examples of Christ's miraculous works. Some of them are described in some detail (for example, as described in the Gospel of John), while others have brief mention (for example in Matthew 4:23-25, when Jesus healed a great multitude of people of their diseases and problems). Such events were not rare in Christ's messianic itinerant ministry of three years. Since the apostle John was a witness to all the events (even those not recorded by the other apostles), and because certainly hundreds of people were cured, free of evil spirits, or raised from the dead, the evangelist indeed wrote accurately when he said it would require much time and a large quantity of writing material (papyrus and ink, e.g. “books”) to write them all down (“every one of them”).

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<sup>75</sup> John 21:25

<sup>76</sup> John 20:30-1. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis is mine.

<sup>78</sup> John 21:25. Emphasis is mine.

The “Sacred Tradition” of Eastern Orthodoxy - including the events related to the “Mother of God” and the numerous saints and “miracles” attributed to their lives decades or even centuries after they lived - certainly do not belong to the category of “*miracles that Jesus performed in the presence of His disciples*” as John states.

However, John 20:31 reveals one crucial fact: although many of Christ’s deeds were not recorded, nor many of his teachings (recall the statement of Paul in Acts 20:35, in which he cites a quote from the Lord Jesus Christ that is not recorded in the gospels: “It is more blessed is to give than to receive”), what is written in the New Testament is more than enough to give any reader who sincerely believes in Christ to have eternal life:

*“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that **by believing you may have life in his name.**”*<sup>79</sup>

So in conclusion, we can see that the verse most touted by Orthodox apologists to defend “Sacred Tradition” does not support their view from a Biblical perspective.

## **Is “Sacred Tradition” Older than Holy Scripture?**

It is noteworthy that this analysis flies in the face of the claims of Eastern Orthodoxy that “Sacred Tradition” is older than the Holy Scriptures. Namely, the decisions of Ecumenical Councils, doctrines of the sacraments, canons and rules of local synods and councils, the rules of St. Basil and other saints, the writings of the Holy Fathers and their hagiographies and other "components" of the Orthodox tradition were created centuries after the completion of writing the Bible and the death of Christ’s apostles!

All the problems that Eastern Orthodox theologians actually want to solve by declaring “Sacred Tradition” equal to Scripture run into the conflict that their beliefs consist of a long series of dogmas that have no support or foundation in the sacred texts of Christianity (New Testament). Many “Sacred Traditions” in fact directly contradict the apostolic theology.

Ivan Nikulin, Orthodox author and teacher at the Moscow Clerical Seminary, acknowledged the reason for the excessive emphasis on the importance of tradition derived from this:

“The importance and necessity of tradition in one form or another<sup>80</sup> remains intact. If ‘Sacred Tradition’ would not correspond to Holy Scripture, **it would bring important implications on a lot of religious issues** (veneration for the saints, icons, prayer for the dead) **and would leave them without a favorable verdict.**”<sup>81</sup>

Thus, only solution remained for the theologians of the Eastern Orthodox churches. They have resorted to proclaiming that doctrine based on “Sacred Tradition” is consistent with

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<sup>79</sup> John 20:31. (NIV) Author’s emphasis.

<sup>80</sup> The author defines these forms as written and oral traditions.

<sup>81</sup> Ivan Nikulin, *Orthodox Apologetics* (1934), 160. Emphasis is mine.

the Scriptures, texts inspired by God and received from the writings of personal disciples of Jesus Christ. According to the view of Orthodox teachers, people without exception are unable to read and understand the Bible apart from the teachings of the Holy Fathers. They note that anything outside of them consisted of “false and tempting thought”<sup>82</sup>:

“The teaching of the Church derives on two sources: Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition, with the Scriptures being the offspring of Sacred Tradition. **Therefore, Holy Scriptures can only be interpreted within the framework of Sacred Tradition.**”<sup>83</sup>

A good response to this claim was given by the Orthodox Bishop George Popovic (Bishop of Nis and Temeşvar who died in 1757). A Serbian educator named Dositej Obradovic recorded the bishop’s words:

“God the just and merciful created man to be free, to give him intelligence and logic to blossom and flourish. The elders thought for themselves (*the Bishop’s views on the Holy Fathers – author’s note*), and we also ought to think for ourselves, not just listen solely to my thoughts. People are logical, endowed by God with reason, and in our hands we have the Gospel of Christ and the apostolic knowledge. **So why then do we need others to drag us by our noses?**<sup>84</sup> This is neither just nor fair.”<sup>85</sup>

If they had studied the Biblical texts independently of the teaching of the numerous “Holy Fathers” exactly as they should study them (although the Orthodox believe that to do this would produce tempting thoughts), a study of the Bible would reveal that the Lord would condemn a great portion of their religious practice. Future chapters will demonstrate that the Word of God forbids Orthodox practices including: the veneration of icons, prayers for the dead, the prayer addressed to the “holy saints”. The Word of God contradicts Orthodoxy regarding the doctrines of salvation, Baptism, Eucharist, the resurrection of the dead - to mention only a few items. If only they would take off the “dark glasses” of “Sacred Tradition” and look at the Bible as God plainly revealed it, they would realize that much of Orthodox belief is derived from the opinions of later church authorities. (These authorities in many ways contradicted each other - which will also be proven in this book.) God would condemn the Orthodox introduction of various innovations in Christian worship, not at all from the original Christian confession. The humble person will realize that the “most holy faith” of Eastern Orthodoxy is not authentic.

This truth has been noticed by one of the greatest and most popular writers of modern times, the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. Although not a member of an evangelical Christian church, nor did he agree with many of their beliefs, Tolstoy wrote several works in which he openly showed dissent with the teachings of the Orthodox Church - which ultimately broke out into open conflict and excommunication from organizations to be mentioned later. Amongst other things, here is an excerpt of what Tolstoy wrote in

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<sup>82</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Orthodoxy* (1991), 69.

<sup>83</sup> *What Do Orthodox Christians Believe?* (Lamp Publishing of the Little Orthodox Library), 2. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>84</sup> In other words, “Do your own thinking, see for yourself! Don’t believe what someone else is feeding you!” Serbian idiom. (Translator’s note)

<sup>85</sup> Dositej Obradovic, *Selected Works* (1988), 94. Author’s emphasis.



comparing the original teachings of Christ with many his interpretations that arose during the later centuries:

“And I began to seek Christianity in the Christian teaching that guides such men's lives. I began to study the Christianity which I saw applied in life and to compare that applied Christianity with its source. The source of Christian teaching is the Gospels, and in them I found the explanation of the spirit which guides the life of all who really live. But together **with this source of the pure water of life I found, wrongfully united with it, mud and slime** which had hidden its purity from me: **by the side of and bound up with the lofty Christian teaching I found a Hebrew and a Church teaching alien to it.**”<sup>86</sup>

The end of the statement confirms that Orthodox belief, in general, is based not only on the Bible, but also the legends that are constantly evolving. Accordingly, we come to learn that the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy constantly add new revelations that become incorporated into its dogma:

‘Sacred Tradition’ **still lives on**, and no less than in the past, ‘Sacred Tradition’ is alive **and being created.**”<sup>87</sup>

It is precisely because the Orthodox tradition continues to constantly add new details (not only new, but also contrary to the teachings of the apostles). Let us once again listen to Bishop George Popovic who properly represents the Biblical perspective:

“But are we free to conclude that it is possible for the Holy Spirit to inspire what Paul taught and bound could also inspire the Holy Fathers? In this way, the Holy Spirit would be contradicting Himself, teaching one thing one day and then tomorrow changing His mind. It would not be possible to believe in the former or the latter. But we should never regard the Holy Spirit in this matter. **Whatever the Holy Spirit once establishes as an institution, it must be unchangeable in life and remain holy.** People often contradict themselves and break the law because they are prone to error. However, the Spirit of God, Who is of eternal truth, sinless, and perfect, can never do what they want or cannot contradict himself nor commit lawlessness or sin.

**Therefore, if the holy fathers work against Paul, we cannot forgive them. They are wrong and have sinned against the revelation of the Holy Spirit, against the preaching, ordinances, and wisdom that Paul taught...**

So what if there were many Holy Fathers? It is useless to try to convince them. Even if one thousand angels came to visit them and the entire world to teach heretical knowledge against the apostolic teachings, we should neither receive nor believe them. It does not say this, but I have the Holy Spirit that reveals what the Apostle Paul said.<sup>88</sup>

‘Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are of God’ teaches us the same from those who accepted the wisdom taught by the Savior. (Author’s note: 1 John 4:1) How we will, therefore, test the spirits?... Is it in accordance with the firsthand knowledge of the Holy Spirit? **And if it is not, then it is not of God or His will. Therefore, it must be heresy.**”<sup>89</sup>

Fully agreeing with the statement of the wise bishop, in the following sections I will continue with the presentation of the Orthodox Patristic understanding of Christianity and

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<sup>86</sup> Lev Tolstoy, *The Gospel* (Metaphysics: Belgrade, 2004), 18-19. Author’s emphasis. See also <http://www.biblicalproportions.com/modules/wfsection/article.php?articleid=56&page=1> .

<sup>87</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *Orthodoxy* (1991), 83.

<sup>88</sup> Author’s note: the bishop refers to Galatians 1:6-10.

<sup>89</sup> Dositej Obradovic, *Selected Works* (1988), 94. Author’s emphasis.

comparing it to original sources - the texts of the Old and New Testaments, as well as many other historical facts. Based on this analysis, every reader of this work will conclude that the Eastern Orthodox Church definitely does not deserve the name "holy, catholic and apostolic" (an adjective which is always presumed yet lacks any factual basis). The reader will see how the "Sacred Tradition" of the church contradicts God's Word, as well as was the case with Jewish tradition, which the Lord condemned and declared as "*worship in vain*". (Mt. 1:1-8, Mk. 7: 1-13).