

**THE HISTORY OF THE
ORIGINS OF
CHRISTIANITY. BOOK
THREE. SAINT PAUL**

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The History of the Origins of Christianity. Book Three. Saint Paul by Ernest Rénan

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ERNEST RÉNAN

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OF THE
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BOOK III.
SAINT PAUL.

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION,	vii
<small>CHAP.</small>	
I. First Journey of Paul—The Cyprus Mission,	1
II. Continuation of the First Journey of Paul—The Galatian Mission,	12
III. First Affair in regard to Circumcision,	28
IV. Slow Propagation of Christianity: Its Introduction at Rome,	50
V. Second Journey of Paul—Another Sojourn at Galatia,	59
VI. Continuation of the Second Journey of Paul—The Macedonian Mission,	69
VII. Continuation of the Second Journey of Paul—Paul at Athens,	86
VIII. Continuation of the Second Journey of Paul—First Sojourn at Corinth,	110
IX. Continuation of the Second Journey of Paul—First Epistles—Interior Condition of the New Churches,	119
X. Return of Paul to Antioch—Quarrel between Peter and Paul—Counter-Mission organised by James, Brother of the Lord,	144

CHAP.	PAGE
XI. Troubles in the Churches of Galatia,	161
XII. Third Journey of Paul—Foundation of the Church at Ephesus,	172
XIII. Progress of Christianity in Asia and Phrygia,	182
XIV. Schisms in the Church of Corinth—Apollon—First Scandals,	191
XV. Continuation of the Third Journey of Paul—The Great Contribution—Departure from Ephesus,	219
XVI. Continuation of the Third Journey of Paul—Second Stay of Paul in Macedonia,	229
XVII. Continuation of the Third Mission—Second Stay of Paul at Corinth—The Epistle to the Romans,	240
XVIII. Return of Paul to Jerusalem,	261
XIX. Last Stay of Paul at Jerusalem—His Apprehension,	267
XX. Captivity of Paul at Cæsarea of Palestine,	282
XXI. Paul's Voyage as a Prisoner,	290
XXII. A Glance over the Work of Paul,	296

INTRODUCTION.

CRITICISM OF ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS.

THE fifteen or sixteen years of religious history comprised in this volume in the embryonic age of Christianity, are the years with which we are best acquainted. Jesus and the primitive Church at Jerusalem resemble the images of a far-off paradise, lost in a mysterious mist. On the other hand, the arrival of St Paul at Rome, in consequence of the step the Author of the Acts has taken in closing at that juncture his narrative, marks in the history of Christian origins the commencement of a profound darkness into which the bloody glare of the barbarous feasts of Nero, and the thunders of the Apocalypse, cast only a few gleams. In particular, the death of the Apostles is enveloped in an impenetrable obscurity. On the contrary, the era of the missions of St Paul, especially of the second mission and the third, is known to us through documents of the greatest value. The Acts, till then so legendary, become suddenly quite authentic; the last chapters, composed in part of the narrative of an eye-witness, are the sole complete historical writings which we have of the early times of Christianity. In fine, those years, through a privilege very rare in similar circumstances, provide us with documents, the dates of which are absolutely authentic, and a series of letters, the most important of which have withstood all the tests of criticism, and which have never been subjected to interpolations.

In the introduction to the preceding volume, we have made an examination of the Book of Acts. We must now discuss *seriatim* the different epistles which bear the name of St Paul. The Apostle informs us himself, that even during his lifetime there were in circulation in his name several spurious letters, and he often took precautions to prevent frauds. We are, therefore, only carrying out his intentions in subjecting the writings which have been put forth as his to a rigorous censorship.

There are in the New Testament fourteen of such epistles, which it will be necessary at the outset to divide into two distinct categories. Thirteen of these writings bear in the text of the letter the name of the Apostle. In other words, these letters profess to be the works of

Paul, so that there is no choice between the following two hypotheses : either that Paul is really the author, or that they are the work of an impostor, who wished to have his compositions passed off as the work of Paul. On the other hand, the fourteenth epistle, the one to the Hebrews, does not bear the name of Paul in the superscription)* ; the author plunges at once *in medias res* without giving his name. The attribution of that epistle to Paul is founded only on tradition.

The thirteen epistles which profess to belong to Paul may, in regard to authenticity, be ranged into five classes :—

1. Epistles incontestable and uncontested. These are the Epistles to the Galatians, the two Epistles to the Corinthians, and the Epistle to the Romans.

2. Epistles that are undoubted, although some objections have been taken to them. These are the two Epistles to the Thessalonians, and the Epistle to the Philippiana.

3. Epistles of a probable authenticity, although grave objections have been taken to them. This is the Epistle to the Colossians, to which is annexed the note to Philemon.

4. Epistle doubtful. This is the epistle addressed to the Ephesians.

5. Epistles false. These are the two Epistles to Timothy, and the Epistle to Titus.

We have nothing to remark here in regard to the epistles of the first category ; the most severe critics, such as Christian Baur, accept them unreservedly. We shall hardly insist on discussing the epistles of the second class either. The difficulties which certain modern writers have raised against them, are merely those slight suspicions which it is the duty of the critic to point out frankly, but without being determined by them when stronger reasons should sway him. Now, these three epistles have a character of authenticity which outweighs every other consideration. The only serious difficulty which has been raised against the Epistles to the Thessalonians, is deduced from the theory of the Anti-Christ appended in the second chapter of the second Epistle to the Thessalonians,—a theory which seems identical with that of the Apocalypse, and which consequently assumed Nero to be dead when the books were written. But that objection permits of solution, as we shall see in the course of the present volume. The author of the Apocalypse only applied to his times an assemblage of ideas, one part of which went back even to the origins of Christian belief, while the other part had reference to the times of Caligula.

The Epistle to the Colossians has been subjected to a much more serious fire of objections. It is undoubted that the language used in that epistle to express the part played by Jesus in the bosom of the divinity, as creator and prototype of all creation, trenches strongly on the language of certain other epistles, and seems to approach in style the writings attributed to John. In reading such passages one believes oneself to be in the full swing of Gnosticism. The language of the Epistle to the Colossians is far removed from that of the undoubted epistles. The vocabulary is a little different ; the style is more emphatic and more

* In a note, the author defines "superscription" to mean the first phrase of the text, and "title" as the heading of each chapter.—*Translator.*

round, and less abrupt and natural. At points it is embarrassed, declamatory and overcharged, similar to the style of the false Epistles to Timothy and to Titus. The ideas are hardly those with which one would expect to meet in Paul. Nevertheless, justification by faith occupies no longer the first place in the predilections of the Apostle. The theory of the angels is much more developed; the æons begin to appear. The redemption of Christ is no longer simply a terrestrial fact; it is extended to the entire universe. Certain critics have been able to discern in many passages either imitations of the other epistles, or the desire of reconciling the peculiar bias of Paul to the different schools of his own (a desire so apparent in the author of the Acts), or the inclination to substitute moral and metaphysical formulas, such as love and science, for the formulas of faith and works which, during the first century, had caused so many contests. Other critics, in order to explain that singular mixture of things agreeable to Paul, and of things but little agreeable to him, have recourse to interpolations, or assume that Paul confided the editing of the epistle in question to Timothy. It is certain that when we sift this epistle to the bottom, as well as the one to the Philippians, for a continued account of the life of Paul, we are not quite so successful as in the great epistles of certain authenticity, anterior to the captivity of Paul. In the latter, the operation furnished, so to speak, its own proofs; the facts and the texts fit the one into the other without effort, and seem to recall one another. In the epistles pertaining to the captivity, on the contrary, more than one laborious combination is required, and more than one contradiction has to be silenced; at first sight, the goings and comings of the disciples do not agree, many of the circumstances of time and place are presented, if we may so speak, backwards.

There is, nevertheless, nothing about all this which is decisive. If the Epistle to the Colossians is, as we believe it to be, the work of Paul, it was written during the last days of the life of the Apostle, at a date when his biography is very obscure. We shall show later on that it is quite admissible, that the theology of St Paul, which, from the Epistles to the Thessalonians to the Epistle to the Romans, is so strongly developed, was developed still further in the interval between the Epistle to the Romans and that of his death. We shall show likewise, that the most energetic expressions of the Epistle to the Colossians were only a short advance upon those of the anterior epistles. St Paul was one of those men who, through their natural bent of mind, have a tendency to pass from one order of ideas to another, even though their style and their manner of perception present sentiments the most fixed. The taint of Gnosticism which is to be found in the Epistle to the Colossians is encountered, though less articulated in the other writings of the New Testament, in the Apocalypse, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In place of rejecting some passages of the New Testament in which are to be found traces of Gnosticism, we must sometimes reason inversely, and seek out in these passages the origin of the gnostic ideas which prevailed in the Second Century. We may, in a sense, even say, that these ideas were anterior to Christianity, and that nascent Christianity borrowed more than once from Gnosticism. In a