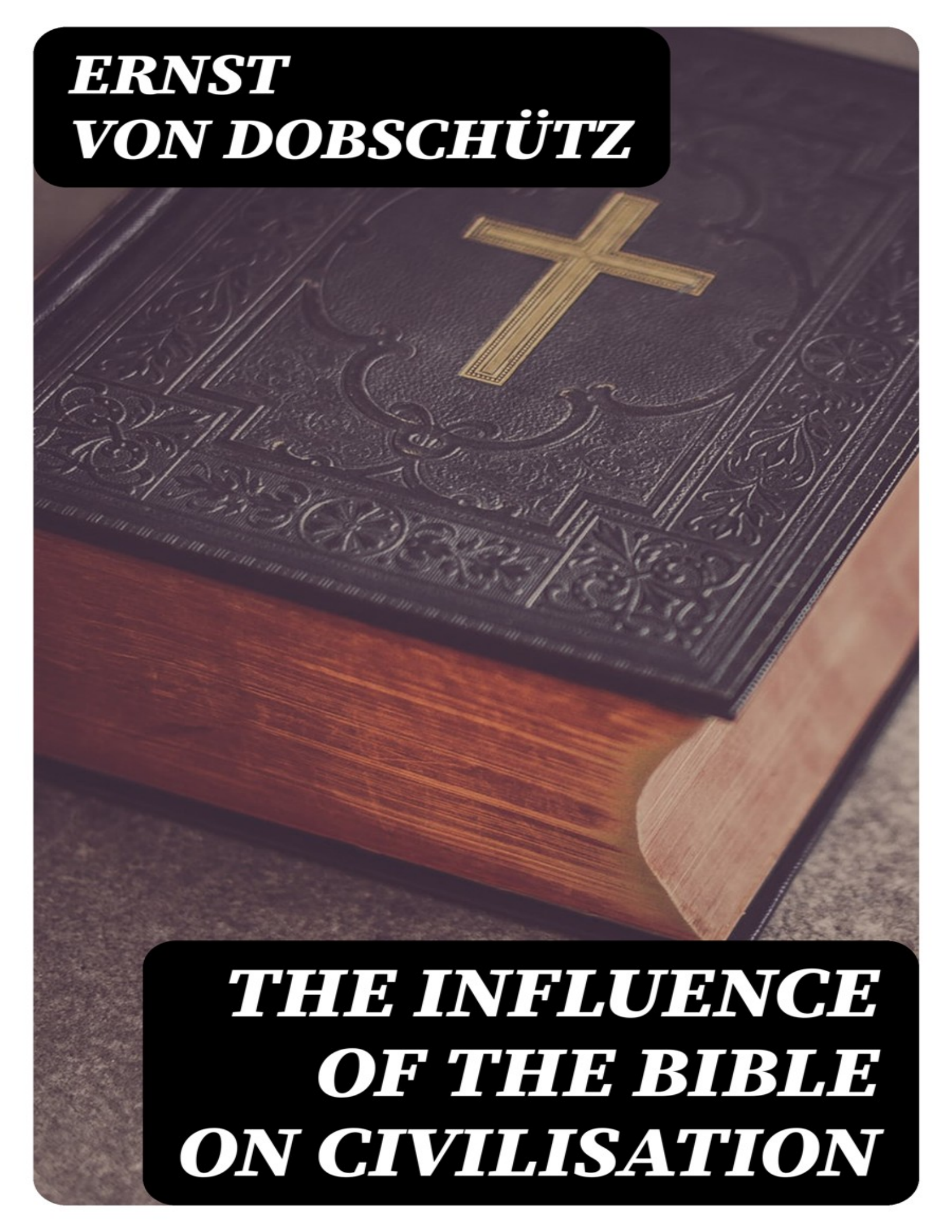




***ERNST
VON DOBSCHÜTZ***

***THE INFLUENCE
OF THE BIBLE
ON CIVILISATION***

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The Influence of the Bible on Civilisation

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PREFACE

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One of the greatest questions of our day is how modern civilisation and Christianity can go on in harmony. One can approach this question by several ways, but historical investigation has always proved to be the surest. The author has in mind to write in German a full "History of the Bible," when time will allow. Meanwhile this brief sketch may prove useful. Readers who look for references will find most of them in an article contributed by the present writer to Dr. J. Hastings's Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics, vol. II, on "The Bible in the Christian Church."

The author wishes to express his thanks to his friend, Professor J. H. Ropes, for kindly reading the proofs for him, to Mr. W. J. Wilson and Mr. H. A. Sherman, who helped him in improving the diction, and to Professor Williston Walker for valuable information regarding early American documents. If any reader should find fault with the English style of this book, he must not blame any translator—the author himself is responsible.

ERNST VON DOBSCHÜTZ.

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THE BIBLE MAKES ITSELF INDISPENSABLE FOR THE CHURCH (UNTIL 325 A. D.)

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There is a small book; one can put it in one's pocket, and yet all the libraries of America, numerous as they are, would hardly be large enough to hold all the books which have been inspired by this one little volume. The reader will know what I am speaking of; it is the Bible, as we are used to call

it—the Book, the book of mankind, as it has properly been called. It has been commented upon, treated in every way, but, curious to say, hardly any one has attempted to trace its history through the centuries and mark the influence which it exerted upon our civilisation.

In order to do this we follow the traces of the Bible through the different periods of human or, to speak more accurately, of Christian civilisation. In the first period of Christian history, the time of persecutions during the first three centuries of our era, there is not much to say about the Bible as influencing civilisation. Christianity was but starting on its way and fighting for its place in the world. The Bible could not exert a civilising influence upon a hostile world. But by impressing its value upon the Christian mind it made itself indispensable for the church and thereby laid the foundation for the future development.

Christianity was a living religion. The first congregations were dwelling in an atmosphere of enthusiasm. There was a general outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophet's words seemed to be fulfilled: "They shall teach no more every man his neighbour and every man his brother, saying: know the Lord; for they shall all know me." Christianity was not a religion of a sacred book, whose dead letter was to be artificially kept alive by learned men. It was a religion of living experiences. Nevertheless, Christianity from the beginning had a sacred book. Jesus and his disciples used the Bible of their people, the Old Testament, and Saint Paul carried it to the Christian communities of gentile origin, which had not known of it before.

Christianity could not do without it. If it was necessary to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, how could this be done without arguing from the Scriptures as proof? If the gospel was to be announced to the heathen they would give less heed to the new tidings than to the statement that it was really the most ancient form of religion as attested by this sacred book, which was superior to all the books of poets and philosophers and legislators by reason of its venerable age. Christianity without any hesitation claimed the Old Testament as its own book, its own Bible. Not only was Jesus the content of this book, he was even believed to be its author. It was the spirit of Jesus which dwelt in the prophets and made them seek and search concerning the salvation offered by Christ (I Peter 1 : 10-11). "The prophets having their grace from him, did prophesy unto him," we are told in the so-called letter of Barnabas. So the Old Testament seemed to be a Christian book both in content and in origin, and it was easy enough to add some properly Christian pamphlets, as Saint Paul's letters and some gospels, the Acts and other letters, and some books of revelation. It was as necessary as it was easy, if Christianity was not to lose contact with its proper origin.

The New Testament, as we have it now, was not complete at the start. It was a collection of primitive Christian writings, larger in some ways than it is now; on the other hand lacking some of its present elements. Its precise content did not become finally established until a very late period, not earlier than the end of the fourth century.

So also the size of the Old Testament was not quite fixed. There were more books in the Greek Bible of the

Alexandrian Jews than in the Hebrew Bible of the Palestinian rabbis. The Christian church at first adopted the Greek Bible, but from time to time some scholar pointed out the difference, and many people thought they had better keep to the Hebrew canon. This view, championed by Saint Jerome, led to a partial rejection of the books which nowadays we usually call the Old Testament Apocrypha, until in the sixteenth century the churches accentuated their difference by a different attitude toward these books, the Calvinists rejecting them altogether, the Roman church including them as an integral part of the Bible, and the Lutherans giving them an intermediate position as books to be read with safety but without canonical authority. When, in 1902, King Edward VII was to be crowned, the British and Foreign Bible Society intended to present to his Majesty the copy of the Bible on which he was to take his oath. Then it was discovered that according to the old regulations the king of England had to take his oath on a complete Bible, that is a Bible containing the Apocrypha. The British and Foreign Bible Society on its part, by its statutes, was prevented from printing Bibles including the Apocrypha; so they presented to the king a most beautiful copy, but the king did not use it for the coronation service. It is the difference between the Alexandrian and the Palestinian canon which reappears in this little struggle and thereby is seen surviving to our own time.

Unsettled as the size of the Old and of the New Testament may have been, nevertheless the principle was established at a very early date that Christianity was to

have a holy Scripture in two parts, one taken over from Judaism, the other added from its own stores.

Let us stop here for a moment and try to realise what this meant. Mohammed, when founding his new religion, acknowledged, it is true, the books of the former religions, but for his own believers the unique authority is the Koran, a book which originated within a single generation and therefore is pervaded by one uniform spirit. Christianity adhered to a Bible whose larger part originated in a period much anterior to its own and in a religion inferior to Christianity. The Bible covers a period of over a thousand years. What a difference in civilisation between the nomadic life of the patriarchs and the time of Jesus! What a difference in spirit between the sons of Jacob killing the whole population of Sichem in order to avenge their sister and Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan! or between the prophet Elijah killing four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and Jesus preaching the love of one's enemies! In fact, it was possible to overcome this difference only in an age which did not read the Bible with historical notions. Even so, the juxtaposition caused much difficulty. We shall see the problem of the Law troubling the church through all the centuries. We shall find the notions of sacrifice and priesthood adapted to Christian institutions. Looking at Charlemagne or Calvin, we realise that the Old Testament is ever introducing its views into Christian minds, as authoritative as any word of the gospel.

Now, at the beginning the influence was rather the other way; the Old Testament was to be interpreted in the light of the New. And, in truth, much light came from the life of

Jesus to the history of the ancient people and to the prophecies. We do not wonder that Christian minds were excited by all this fresh illumination, and we must not wonder that sometimes they remodelled the tradition of the life of Christ to accord with the Old Testament.

The harmony between the two Testaments soon became a leading idea in Christian doctrine. Some heretics, indeed, would not accept the Old Testament. Marcion maintained that it came from an inferior god, while the supreme God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, had revealed himself only through his Son. He found a great many contrasts between the Old and the New Testament, and this criticism was supported by pagan philosophers, as, for example, Porphyry. The church, therefore, was most anxious to establish the harmony of the Testaments by any means at its command. Taste varies from century to century; the minute parallelism constructed by some early Christian writers, and evidently much admired by their contemporaries, seems to us rather ridiculous and fanciful. On the other hand, the church was right in maintaining the harmony. The New Testament needs to be explained from the Old Testament; it is open to much misunderstanding when taken apart. There was almost no sense for historical development at that time; the criticism of Ptolemæus, in his famous letter to Flora, where he speaks of several strata of revelation running through the Old and the New Testament, is an exceptional one. For most of the faithful the Christian doctrine was directly looked for and found in the Old Testament; the gospel was contained in every one of its books, from Genesis to Malachi. Unity was conceived as uniformity.

This was the system which appealed most to the average Christian mind. And the Bible was open to all Christians, as Harnack has brilliantly demonstrated in a recent publication. The ancient church laid stress upon this publicity and never tried to withdraw the Bible from the people. There was no hidden mystery regarding the Bible. On the contrary, all members of the church were anxiously urged to make themselves as familiar with the Bible as possible. They were supposed to have copies of their own and to read them privately as well as in the congregation. Even when the struggles about the right doctrine began and the heretics sometimes held to the Bible as their champion against the doctrine of the church, the church did not remove the Bible from public discussion. The ecclesiastical party maintained that the Bible was always in favour of the true doctrine; one needs but to know how to read it. Tertullian, it is true, once in the heat of controversy declared that it was no use arguing against heretics from the Bible, but he did it, nevertheless, and so did the other fathers.

The Bible proved its spiritual value to the experience of every reader. A man familiar with the Psalms has a treasure which cannot be lost; in any situation he will find what is suitable for his needs. If one looks for examples of faith, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews in his eleventh chapter gives a splendid model for finding heroes of faith all through the Bible. The book of Genesis, especially its first chapters, was of particular interest for most of the readers on account of the sublime description there given of the beginnings of mankind. The creation story in Genesis implies much more than even the finest of all Greek myths, namely, the myth in

Plato's *Timæus*, with which it was compared by the emperor Julian. The mighty words, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," proved to be the one true answer to all the cosmological questions of Greek philosophy, and besides there was ample room for introducing whatever was wanted—such as the creation and the fall of the angels—if only one knew how to read between the lines.

In an old Christian book dealing with church regulations and the rules for individual Christian life we find the following admonition to use no other book at all except the Bible, because, as the author says, the Bible contains literature of every kind. The passage runs:[\[1\]](#)

Stay at home and read in the Law and in the Book of the Kings and in the Prophets and in the Gospel (which is) the fulness of these things. Keep far away from all the books of the heathen; for what hast thou to do with foreign words or with false laws or prophecies which also easily cause young people to wander from the faith? What then is wanting to thee in the Word of God, that thou throwest thyself upon these myths of the heathen? If thou wishest to read the tales of the fathers, thou hast the Book of the Kings; or of wise men and philosophers, thou hast the Prophets amongst whom thou wilt find more wisdom and science than among the wise men and the philosophers, because they are the words of God, of the one only wise God. If thou desirest song, thou hast the Psalms of David or if the beginning of the world, thou hast the Genesis of great Moses; if law and commandments, thou hast the book of Exodus of the

Lord our God. Therefore keep entirely away from all these foreign things, which are contrary to them.

[1] Didascalia, ch. ii, p. 5 in Mrs. M. D. Gibson's translation.

The Bible, in fact, pervaded the whole life of a Christian. It was the Bible, its history, its commandments, that he was taught as a child in his parents' home. When the girls gathered in the women's hall to spin, they would sing and talk about God's revelations more eagerly than even Sappho had praised her luxurious love—according to an expression used by Tatian in his Apology. The prayers, private as well as ecclesiastical, all echoed Biblical phrases, and even at burials the Christians sang joyful psalms.

So the Bible became familiar to the Christians of that time. We are astonished to find how well they knew it. The sermons of this period are full of Biblical allusions, and evidently the preacher could expect them to be understood.

This is the more remarkable as the circulating of the Bible in this time met with the greatest difficulties. There was, of course, a large amount of Bible reading in the congregations. According to Justin's description of early Christian worship about 150 A. D., the service began with continuous reading of the Bible through many chapters, as far as time would allow. Then an officer, bishop or elder, would begin to preach. The office of reading was esteemed so highly that it was regarded as based on a special spiritual gift; the *anagnostes*, *i. e.*, the reader, in the earliest time had his place among the prophets and spirit-gifted teachers. And, in fact, if we look at the earliest manuscripts of the Bible which have come down to us, we shall almost think that supernatural assistance was necessary for reading

them: no punctuation, no accent, no space between the words, no breaking off at the end of a sentence. The reader had to know his text almost entirely by heart to do it well. From the "Shepherd of Hermas," a very interesting book written by a Roman layman about 140 A. D., we learn that some people gathered often, probably daily, for the special purpose of common reading and learning. But even granted that the memory of these men was not spoiled by too much reading, as is ours, so that by hearing they were able to learn by heart—it is said of some rabbis that they did not lose one word of all their master had told them, and, in fact, the Talmudic literature was transmitted orally for centuries—nevertheless, we must assume that these Christians had their private copies of the Bible at home. The evidence from the allusions of preachers to private reading is strong. Cyprian addresses a Christian: "Your life should be one of assiduous prayer or reading (of the Bible): now you speaking to God, now God to you."

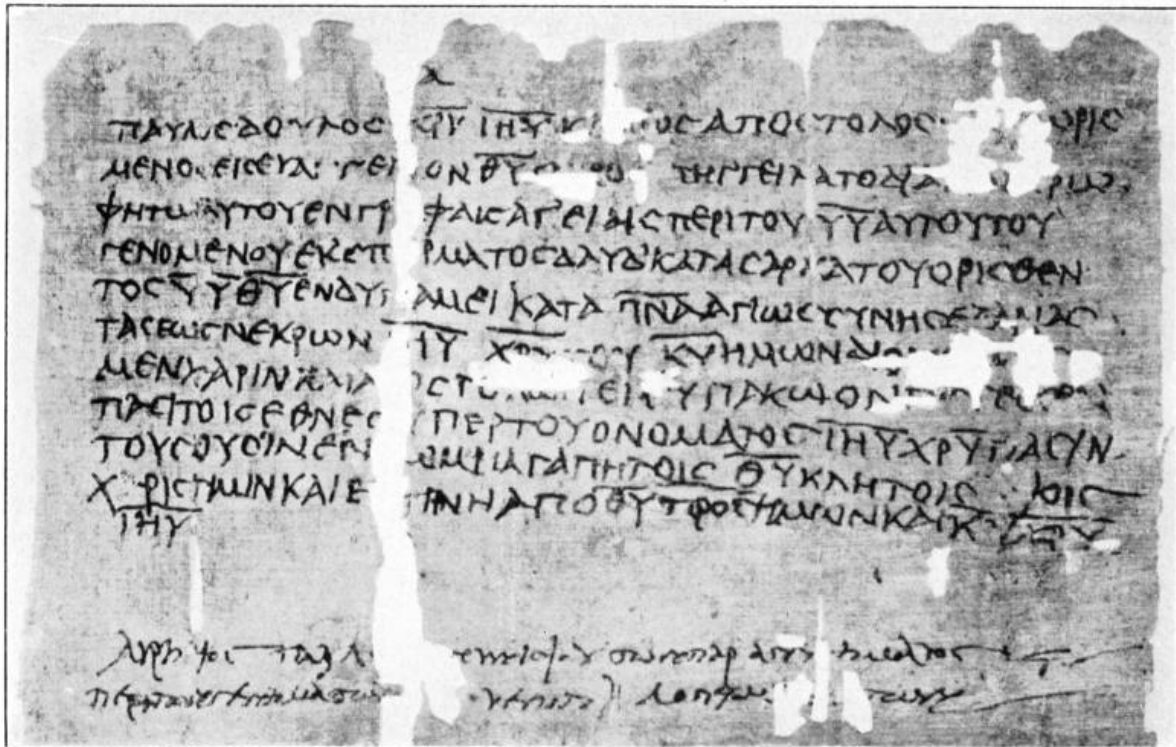


PLATE I—HARVARD PAPYRUS

An attempt to copy the letters of St. Paul (Romans counts as A = first letter) giving the text only unto Romans 1 : 7; late third or early fourth century.

From Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Vol. II, Pl. II, Egypt Exploration Fund—London.

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Here begins our difficulty: how did they get so many copies? There was an organised book-trade in the ancient world; publishers had their offices, using (instead of printing-presses) slaves who were trained in copying; they had shorthand writers, as well as calligraphers to do the fine writing. But as long as Christianity was still an oppressed

religion it is doubtful if the Bible was among the books which publishers would care to take. The Christians were, most of them, poor people who could not spend much money for procuring Bibles. Besides, it was no easy thing to get a complete Bible. At that time the books were still written on papyrus rolls, not in book form. Only one side of the papyrus could be used; the roll would become unwieldy if too long. So, in order to get all the books of the Old and the New Testament, at least two dozen rolls had to be written. Maybe a simple Christian copied for himself one gospel or some letters or even one or more books from the Old Testament. There are preserved on papyrus some unfinished attempts which show what hard work it was (Plate I). We can scarcely imagine a man going with this heavy hand through all the books of the Bible.

We are told that wealthy Christians helped their brethren by procuring copies for them. Origen, the greatest Bible scholar of the ancient church, is said to have been supported by a rich admirer, who put at his disposal a number of slave copyists. With their help he succeeded in creating one of the greatest works which Bible criticism ever undertook, his so-called Hexapla, which is a comparison of more than six various Greek translations of the Old Testament. Scholars in the nineteenth century held that scarcely more than one copy of this enormous work had ever been written, but by recent discoveries we know that it was copied several times (Plate II). A later admirer of Origen, Pamphilus, is said always to have carried with him several rolls in order to provide poor brethren. Now that was the third century. Christianity had already begun to spread