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# Third Corinthians

By MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

**T**HE mysteries surrounding the apocryphal letter called Third Corinthians are enough to challenge the imagination and intuitive skill of the most astute Sherlock Holmes who might be inclined to operate in the field of the New Testament. Who wrote the letter? How did it get into the canon of the Syrian and Armenian churches for a few hundred years? <sup>1</sup> Why was it lost for so many centuries? These are some of the exciting questions posed by this remarkable document.

## I. ITS DISCOVERY

Third Corinthians came to light for the first time in modern Biblical research during the middle of the seventeenth century, when James Ussher, most famous for his system of Biblical chronology, and John Gregory quite accidentally came across a partial copy of it in Armenian, supported by an Italian translation, among the acquisitions made by Baron Gilbert North through his mercantile connections in Smyrna.<sup>2</sup> This document contained a letter to Paul from the elders of Corinth, a brief description of Paul's reaction to this letter as a prisoner at Philippi, and, following that, an epistle purporting to be the Apostle's reply. This particular copy supplied only the first eight verses of a letter that is now often divided into thirty-six.

Despite the fact that North's document very obviously contained Paul's supposed reply only in part, the text was published in 1714 by Philip Masson, who had in the meantime purchased North's manuscript for his own expanding library of codices. In the following year David Wilkins provided a Latin translation for this abbreviated version. He gave a copy to Professor La Croze of Berlin for an expert's opinion on its genuineness. There it was published in 1719 by John A. Fabricius, in Part III of his *Codex Apocryphus Novi Testamenti*.

At about this same time a teacher of mathematics in Cambridge, William Whiston, was able to acquire a full copy of this letter in



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Armenian through an English merchant at Aleppo. This manuscript also contained an Arabic translation of the whole correspondence between the Corinthian elders and St. Paul. William Whiston produced an English translation of this document in 1727 and published it as the second part of his *Collection of Authentic Records Belonging to the Old and New Testament*. He required his two sons, William and George, to acquire a thorough knowledge of Armenian so that they might be able to provide a new and more exact Latin translation of the whole text. What is more, the sons did the work into Greek. Through their efforts this document, carefully annotated, was added as an appendix to *Mosis Chorenensis Historiae Armeniacae Libri Tres*, in Armenian, Greek, and Latin. Another set of translations into both Greek and Latin was published by John Carpozov in 1776 and titled *Epistolae Duae Apocryphae*.

The most thorough study of Third Corinthians was done a little less than fifty years later, by a German pastor, Wilhelm Friedrich Rinck. His volume, published in 1823 at Heidelberg, is called, *Das Sendschreiben der Korinther an den Apostel Paulus und das dritte Sendschreiben Pauli an die Korinther*. Pfarrer Rinck personally went to the island of San Lazaro, near Venice, to examine eight manuscripts of this correspondence as found in the Armenian monastery of that place.<sup>3</sup> His text and his conclusions are based on a thorough analysis of these eight codices. At this monastery Pastor Rinck had the able assistance of the abbot, Father Paschal Aucher. On the basis of his thorough study, Pfarrer Rinck was persuaded of the authenticity of this correspondence. He concluded that Third Corinthians should have been retained among the canonical books of the New Testament.

Since that time various other copies of this letter have been found, particularly in Latin. The first Latin version was discovered in 1890 in the Ambrosian Library in Milan and was published by Berger and Carrière in 1891. In 1892 Adolf Harnack made available a Latin version from Laon in the *Theologische Literaturzeitung* of that year.<sup>4</sup> Just recently another complete Latin version of this correspondence was discovered in the Public Scientific Library of Berlin among the remains acquired in 1882 from Sir Hamilton of England by the State of Prussia. This new text was published in



1952/1953 by H. Boese in *Die Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*.<sup>5</sup> Two fragments of Latin translations are found also in the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris and in the Central Library of Zurich.

## II. A DESCRIPTION

It has already been indicated that Third Corinthians is only part of some correspondence between the church at Corinth and Paul. It is preceded by a letter written by Stephanas and the elders of the Corinthian congregation. Theirs is an urgent request for advice in view of the fact that two heretics, Simon and Cleobus, are troubling the Corinthian Christians with such doctrines as that God is not almighty, that there is really no resurrection of the body, that man was not created by God but by an angel, that Christ was not truly incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and that the Old Testament Prophets are to be ignored in this day of a new dispensation. Between this letter and the Apostle's reply is a brief notice on the messengers who brought this letter to Paul at Philippi and on the Apostle's reaction to this sad news from Corinth.<sup>6</sup>

According to the chapter and verse division established by Rinck, Paul's epistle has two chapters of eighteen verses each. It is a detailed refutation of each of the errors ascribed to Simon and Cleobus, in theological and dogmatic terms and formulations, however, that can hardly date from a period earlier than the latter half of the second century.

## III. ITS ORIGINS

The rediscovery of this curious correspondence quite naturally raises the question as to the origin of Third Corinthians. All of the Whistons, father and sons, were persuaded that the Apostle himself had written this epistle. Pfarrer Rinck came to the same conclusion after a careful study of the documents available on San Lazaro.

In his argumentation Rinck makes much of the fact that 1 Cor. 5:9 speaks of an epistle which is no longer extant and that 1 Cor. 7:1 makes reference to a letter written to Paul by the Corinthians. Rinck uses these references not to assert that the correspondence presently under discussion actually supplies these missing documents. His point is that the references in First Corinthians suggest the likelihood of further writing. He is convinced that Third



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Corinthians was written during Paul's stay in Macedonia as referred to in Acts 20:2. In that case this epistle would follow Second Corinthians and precede the Epistle to the Romans. In fact, that is where the letter is found in the eight manuscripts examined and studied by Rinck.

Rinck's discussion of the internal evidence for the genuineness of Third Corinthians is very detailed. He is particularly convincing in his demonstration that the Armenian is a translation from a version that used a Greek original. This last point is generally conceded today although much of the rest of Rinck's points are rejected for reasons that seem valid in every way. No one, therefore, today accepts Third Corinthians as coming directly from the hand of Paul; hence it is now always referred to as apocryphal.

Yet it must be admitted that part of the early church did accept Third Corinthians as canonical. St. Gregory the Illuminator, founder of the Armenian Church, just by way of example, referred to a passage in Third Corinthians (ch. 1, v. 9, according to the division used below) as apostolic. He does so in one of his homilies to neophytes.<sup>7</sup>

The Syrian Church treated Third Corinthians in much the same way, as witness the fact that St. Ephraem's Commentary discusses the Third Epistle immediately following with the same seriousness as the two other letters to the Corinthians.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is quite possible, as Zahn suggests, that Third Corinthians was incorporated in the Syrian Bible as early as the latter half of the third century.

The Armenian Bible did not come into being until the fifth century, about a century after St. Gregory's use of a passage from Third Corinthians. It owed much to Syrian influences. Nevertheless, by this time Third Corinthians was included among the apocryphal writings, second to the last, just preceding the Dormition of Saint John.<sup>9</sup> This shift can probably be explained by the fact that by the fifth century Armenian church leaders had come into contact with the Greek Church and had observed that the New Testament of the Greeks contained no Third Corinthians at all, either as canonical or apocryphal.<sup>10</sup> And yet Third Corinthians is found in certain Armenian lectionaries. Moreover Theodor Khertenavor in the seventh century used this apocryphal correspondence, partic-



ularly the last verses of Third Corinthians, to argue for the genuineness of the "bloody sweat" in Luke 22:44.<sup>11</sup>

Eventually both the Armenian and the Syrian churches eliminated Third Corinthians completely from their canon, mostly, it would seem, because they were not able to find any text of it either in the lectionaries or the New Testament of the Greek Church.

That Third Corinthians got into some early Latin versions of the New Testament as an apocryphal epistle seems rather probable, since at least three different texts and two fragments have been found of it since 1890. All of these present a text from the province of Milan.<sup>12</sup>

But this does not solve the problem of the origin of Third Corinthians. There is sufficient evidence to show that the manuscripts presently available echo an original Greek text. And yet no Greek original is extant; the Greek versions we have are private translations from the Armenian. It is particularly significant that the Greek "Acta Pauli" published by C. Schmidt in 1936 do not contain this epistle.<sup>13</sup>

For a time the scholars who were acquainted with this apocryphal correspondence shared the view of Paul Vetter as set forth in a special monograph prepared by him for an academic observance of the birthday of William II of Wuerttemberg on February 25, 1894. Vetter conjectured that Third Corinthians had its origin in Edessa, Syria, around A. D. 200, where it was used to combat the heresy of Bardesanes.<sup>14</sup>

This would explain why there are samples of this correspondence in the literature of the Syrian Church. Since that church strongly affected the Armenian leaders, Vetter's conjecture is helpful in understanding why Third Corinthians was found for a time in the Armenian New Testament. But it does not settle the question of a Greek original.

In his *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons*, where he presents a new translation of St. Ephraem's commentary on this section, Theodor Zahn proposed the suggestion that the original Greek was part of one of the rather numerous "Acta Pauli"<sup>15</sup> and that in the controversy with the followers of Bardesanes the church in Edessa found this part of the document useful and appropriated the



correspondence for its purposes as a genuine document. Vetter himself later accepted Zahn's suggestion in a modified form. He was persuaded that the verses on the resurrection of the body in chapter two of Third Corinthians were added by some Syrian author.<sup>16</sup> In 1950 John Quasten, in his *Patrology*, simply calls Third Corinthians "another part of the 'Acta Pauli.'"<sup>17</sup>

Zahn's hypothesis would account for a Greek original, now lost, as many of the "Acta Pauli" are. It would explain the presence of the Syrian and Armenian versions of this correspondence. The Latin versions may date from a later time, when there was more than sporadic contact between the Armenian and the Latin Church.

If Third Corinthians is a *Bruchstueck eines Romans*, as Zahn calls it,<sup>18</sup> this fact would account for the practice of keeping not only the Apostle's letter but also the letter of the elders from Corinth and the historical statement between the two letters in the Scriptures of Syria and Armenia. This was a strange procedure, indeed, in view of the fact that no such isagogical materials precede any of the other books of the New Testament.

It might be added here that those who once considered this correspondence between Corinth and Paul genuine succeeded in making a good case for their belief that the heretical teachers referred to in the Corinthian letter were Simon Magus and Cleobulus,<sup>19</sup> who are mentioned in a few other early Christian documents and are described as teaching the false doctrines to which Third Corinthians purports to be a reply. This may be of some interest at the moment, since Simon plays a major role in *The Silver Chalice*, a currently popular book and movie.

#### IV. A TRANSLATION

As far as we have been able to determine, there is no adequate English translation of Third Corinthians. It may be helpful, therefore, to append one to the present discussion. Our translation will include the letter of the Corinthian elders to Paul as well as the brief historical paragraph between this and the Apostle's reply. This version follows the German text prepared by Pfarrer Rinck and in its preparation was carefully compared with the Latin text of Berlin as offered by Boese.

## THE CORINTHIANS TO PAUL

1. Stephanas and his fellow elders, Dabnus, Eubulus, Theophilus, and Xinon, send greetings to Paul, our father, preacher, and faithful teacher in Christ Jesus.

2. Two men, called Simon and Cleobus, have come to Corinth and have destroyed the faith of some people by their deceitful and destructive doctrines.

3. You yourself must be apprised of these teachings. For we have never heard such doctrines taught either by you or by the other Apostles.

4. We know and accept only those things which we have heard from you; and what we have learned from the other Apostles we also treasure highly.

5. Now, the Lord has shown us great mercy by allowing us to hear from you again, since you are still with us in this life.

6. Write to us, therefore; or, better yet, come personally in all haste.

7. Our trust is in the Lord that He has liberated us from the power of the Evil One, even as this was revealed to Thomas.

8. The words of these polluted men are those of error; for they say and teach as follows:

9. We ought not to accept the Prophets, they insist;

10. They say that God is not almighty;

11. They deny the resurrection of the body of those who have died;

12. Moreover, man was not created by God;

13. Nor was Jesus Christ born with a human body conceived by the Virgin Mary;

14. They do not believe that the world is God's creation, but that of an angel.

15. Hurry now and come to us so that our city of Corinth may remain without offense. Publicly refute what these men teach in their folly, and drive them from the city. Farewell!

The two deacons Thereptus and Tychus took this epistle and brought it to the city of Philippi. When Paul received it, he forgot his bonds, into which he had been put on account of Statonice, the wife of Apopholanus, and was deeply grieved at what he read. With tears he replied: "It would be better for me to have died.



Then I would be with my Lord and would not have to hear of such poisonous doctrines. You see how one woe is heaped upon another; and with all of these great and many sorrows I must remain a prisoner in bonds, while I witness such baneful situations as this, where the devil attacks with his treachery to create destruction and chaos."

And so with a very heavy heart Paul prepared his reply to this letter.

## PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

### *Chapter One*

1. Paul, a prisoner in bonds on behalf of Jesus Christ, sends greetings to the brethren at Corinth in advance of his own coming by reason of the manifold errors that have sprung up in your midst.

2. I am not at all surprised at the rapid spread of the seductive teachings of the Evil One. The Lord Jesus, however, will soon appear in judgment over such as pervert and despise His commands.

3. From the very outset I taught you those truths which I myself learned from those first Apostles who spent all of their time in the company of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I tell you even now that the Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, a descendant of the house of David, by the working of the Holy Spirit, sent to her from heaven by the Father,

4. So that Jesus might enter this world of ours and redeem all flesh by Himself becoming man and that He might raise us from the dead, even as He revealed Himself to us as our Predecessor in this matter,

5. And that we might be shown that man was indeed created by the Father.

6. For that reason man did not remain isolated in death and corruption. On the contrary, he experienced God's visitation in grace so that he might, through the adoption of sons, receive life.

7. For our God, who is Lord of all and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who made heaven and earth, first sent His Prophets to the Jews, to dissuade them from their sinful ways and to lead them into the paths of righteousness.

8. For since He desired to save the house of Israel, He poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Prophets so that they might proclaim the true worship of God and foretell the birth of Christ far in advance of the actual event.

9. But he who may be called the Infamous One interfered with their work; for he had ambitions to make himself God and to that end led all men into the slavery of sin, since the time of final judgment was rapidly approaching.

10. However, the almighty God was determined not to reject His creation but to have man live in righteousness. He saw the misery surrounding his creation, had mercy on mankind, and at the end of times sent His Holy Spirit to overshadow the virgin of whom the Prophets had written aforetime.

11. She believed with all her heart and so was found worthy to conceive and to bear our Lord Christ,

12. So that through this very mortal and transient body, in which the Evil One boasted, Jesus might overcome him and bring him to the realization that he is not God at all.

13. For Jesus Christ assumed this mortal flesh as His own and so saved men by bringing them to eternal life through faith,

14. By preparing a holy temple in His body devoted to that righteousness which was designed for a time yet to come.

15. We, too, have come to faith in Him and are saved in that way.

16. You must realize, therefore, that those men are not the children of righteousness but of wrath; for they do not allow the merciful kindness of God to reach them; for they say that heaven and earth and all creation are not the works of Him who is the Father of all.

17. These accursed men teach the doctrines of the serpent. In the power of God you must flee from them and drive their perverted doctrine from your midst and far away.

18. For you are not sons of disobedience but children of our beloved Church.

### *Chapter Two*

1. For that reason this present time has been proclaimed to all men as one of resurrection.

2. Those, however, who say that there is no resurrection of the body will themselves not rise to eternal life but to damnation. They will be raised up to judgment with their disobedient body.



3. There will be no resurrection to life for the body; for they are found to be persons who deny such a resurrection.

4. But you people of Corinth know from your experience with kernels of wheat and other kinds of seed that the grain is buried in the soil and dies there.

5. But thereafter it sprouts, according to the will of the Lord, dressed in the same kind of body that we buried. Now, it is not just a simple body that grows up: it is blessed with various kinds of blossoms and fruits.

6. However, we must find our parables not only among grains and seeds but also in the bodies of men that are worthy of honor.

7. You know of Jonah, the son of Amathia. Since he delayed in his mission to preach to the citizens of Nineveh, he lay buried for three days and three nights in the belly of a big fish.

8. After three days God heard his cry of distress and brought him up out of the depths. But his body had suffered no harm; not even an eyelash of his was twisted.

9. How much greater mercy will you be shown, O ye of little faith! If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, He will raise you from the dead even as He is risen.

10. If the body of the prophet Elisha, as he threw himself on a corpse, brought a dead person to life, how much more will you be raised up with an unmaimed body on the last day — you, who are nourished by the body, the blood, and the spirit of Christ!

11. The prophet Elisha took the widow's son into his arms and brought him back from the realm of the dead.

12. How much more will Jesus Christ raise you up on that day, even as He rose with a body that saw no corruption!

13. Therefore do not lightheartedly accept some other doctrine in this matter.

14. Let no one add to my sorrows henceforth; for I carry these chains on my body that I might win Christ; and I suffer these pains in my body that I might be found worthy of the resurrection from the dead.

15. Now, each one among you be faithful in keeping the commands which you have received from the mouth of the blessed Prophets and from the holy Gospel. Then you will obtain your reward in the resurrection from the dead: you will inherit eternal life.

16. But if there should be someone who is without faith and therefore transgresses (the commands), he calls down upon himself the judgment of the godless. He will suffer the same punishment that is in store for those who follow the precepts of these heretics.

17. For they are a generation of vipers, a brood of serpents and basilisks. Avoid them, and flee from them in the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ!

18. And now may the peace and the grace of the Beloved First-born be with you. Amen!

#### NOTES

(All references are to items listed and described in the Bibliography)

1. Moffatt (p. 129) includes some Latin churches. The evidence does not seem to warrant such a conclusion (cf. Boese, p. 68).
2. Rinck (pp. 1—15) has the best description of those early discoveries. Zahn (pp. 592—595) uses him almost exclusively.
3. Among Lord Byron's many accomplishments must be listed a very free translation of this epistle as found in one of the Armenian documents on San Lazaro (cf. Moore's *Life of Byron*, VI, 269—275).
4. No. 1, pp. 7—9.
5. Pages 66, 67.
6. The Zurich fragment is the only Latin text containing this brief historical note.
7. Rinck, p. 16.
8. Zahn, pp. 596—610.
9. Rinck, p. 14.
10. Ibid., p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 16.
12. Boese, p. 67. It had been supposed for a time that the Latin of this epistle was to be found only in lectionaries. However, the Berlin text is contained in a codex of the Scriptures, at the very end.
13. Boese, p. 69.
14. Vetter, pp. 13—17.
15. Zahn, p. 608.
16. Vetter, p. 17.
17. I, 132.
18. Page 608.
19. Rinck, pp. 95 ff.

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