



# Analysis of Studies on The History of Early Christian Communities

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the primary sources and historiographical approaches in studying early Christian communities. Using a historical and textual analysis method, the research examines canonical and apocryphal sources, apologetic writings, and archaeological evidence to understand the development of Christian thought and its institutionalization. The results highlight the role of early Christian literature, the influence of theological debates, and the historical narratives shaping Christian traditions. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious historiography and interfaith relations.

**Keywords:** Early Church, Ecclesia, Canonical Sources, Apocryphal Sources, Apologies, Nestorianism.

## Introduction

The rich spiritual heritage of the people of Uzbekistan, its ancient culture and the religious beliefs of its various nationalities have become an object of interest for the international community. Our republic is a secular state and supports interfaith peace and harmony. Strengthening interfaith tolerance and ensuring religious tolerance in society have also been identified as a priority task.

The importance of studying the history of christian communities is reflected in the limited information available among the population about the activities of non-islamic religious movements, which reveals the differences in their structure, scope of activity, and traditions.

## Methodology

In Christianity, a church is a building intended for the religious activity or worship of a representative of this religion. Such a definition of a community of believers as a “special separate building” for worship was considered alien to the early Christians, since they met in each other’s homes (Acts of the Apostles, 1:13, 2:46, 12:12; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15). The term church in the Bible comes from the Greek word “ἐκκλησία” - “ecclesia”, which means “called out ones” or “gathering of people”. Therefore, the word church can

denote not only the building, but also the people themselves (Acts of the Apostles, 19:30-41, 7:38). A vivid example of this is the period of the apostle Paul's ministry in Ephesus, mentioned in the Bible. During the time that the apostle Paul was preaching Jesus Christ in Ephesus, the local artisans organized a conspiracy and caused a riot. This "assembly" of the people is one of the meanings of the term "church" here.

The word "church" in the New Testament is associated with "communication" or "people gathered together for prayer" (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15). For example, in his letter to the believers in Corinth, the apostle Paul greeted the community that was meeting for prayer in the home of the Jew Aquila and Priscilla. Based on the context of this letter, the word "church" here suggests the meaning of people gathered for prayer.

Later, when Christianity was legalized and gained great influence in the Roman Empire, especially after the conversion of Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, the word church began to mean "a building where believers meet".

The word "church" also plays an important role in denoting Christian denominations and local Christian communities, for example, the "Orthodox Church", the "Catholic Church" or the "Lutheran Church".

Church history, that is, the history of Christianity, focuses on a group of Christians living in a particular area. For example, most books in Russian called "Church History", tell about the history of Russian Orthodoxy, sometimes this history begins with Adam (for example, Nestor's "Tale of Bygone Years". Western historians, when describing church history, wrote only about the history of the papacy (Bartholomew of Luksky "New History of the Church". This approach is considered relatively narrow, and, as the name suggests, it is appropriate to study "church history" as a whole, combining the history of all regions where this religion existed.

In the first century of the existence of the Christian Church, almost all of its written activity was aimed at:

1. Unifying the narratives about the history and teachings of the first preachers of Christianity
2. Presenting and explaining this teaching in such a way that it is applied to specific issues posed by life
3. Writing activity to maintain spiritual and doctrinal unity among scattered communities.

We can learn about the early Christian communities from the following sources:

1. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ:
  - Christianity initially spread through oral tradition, as the apostles and early disciples shared stories and teachings about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection;
  - The written Gospels: The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) eventually became the primary written sources that provide the theological and historical foundation of the Christian faith.

## 2. The Apostolic Writings:

- The letters of the apostle Paul: These letters provide insight into the teachings and practices of the early church;
- The Acts of the Apostles: This book tells the story of the early spread of Christianity, focusing on the work of Peter and Paul;
- Other New Testament scriptures: the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude, the book of Revelation, etc. provide additional information about the early communities.

## 3. Archaeological findings:

- Early Christian settlements: ruins of churches, houses, and cemeteries prove the widespread spread of this religion;
- Artifacts: pottery, coins, and inscriptions provide information about the daily life and beliefs of early Christians.

Historical sources in Christianity are usually divided into primary sources and literary sources. Primary sources include legal documents, administrative orders, council decisions, economic documents, and archaeological monuments. Literary sources include religious, philosophical, historical, and artistic works. Primary sources for early Christianity are very few, so more literary sources are relied on. Literary sources for early Christianity are divided into Christian and non-Christian sources.

Christian sources can be divided into:

- The canonical sources of the New Testament include the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), the Acts of the Apostles, 21 Epistles of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation. These books are considered canonical church sources because they were included in the ecumenical councils;
- Apocryphal sources of the New Testament - these include the apocryphal Gospels, the Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), the work of the Apostle Hermas "Pastyr", the letters of Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch;
- Apologies - works written in the second half of the 2nd century - the beginning of the 3rd century.
- Works of church writers (Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Lactantius and others);
- Historical works and chronicles (Eusebius of Caesarea, Orosi, Byzantine chroniclers);
- Works of art (Commodian poems);

Non-Christian sources include the following groups:

- Historical works (Josephus Flavius, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio, collections of "Scriptores Historiae Augustae");
- Works of anti-Christian Greco-Roman writers (Lucian, Celsus, Porphyry);
- Religious works of Judaism (Qumran documents, Talmud);
- Gnostic works (Xenoboskion papyri).

## Result and Discussion

S.B. Sannikov in his book "Twenty Centuries of Christianity. The First Millennium" considered the historiography of the Christian church. The person who introduced the history of Christianity as a separate direction in science is Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote "Church History" (Ἐκκλησιαστική Ἱστορία) in 10 books and "Chronicles of Emperor Constantine" in them. In them, not only recording events, but also analyzing their causes played a key role.

Eusebius' books, which described the history of Christianity until 378, gave rise to many imitations, including the famous works of Jerome, Rufim of Aquileia and other chroniclers. In subsequent centuries, historians mainly limited themselves to adding descriptions of events of later periods to Eusebius' books. Thus, in the 5th century, Eusebius' history was completed by Socrates (until 439), then by Evagrius (until the end of the 6th century) and others.

In the Middle Ages, almost no works on Christian history were written. Basically, the history of Christianity was presented in connection with political history or it was included in the description of the history of individual countries and peoples. For example, the famous works of Gregory of Tours "History of the Franks" or "Church History of the Anglian Tribes" by Bede the Just can be considered examples of this.

Starting from the 15th century, a revival began in the study of Christian history. The first work of the new era was the "Magdeburg Centuries" – "History divided into centuries", compiled in Protestant Magdeburg. It was written by a team of authors led by Flavius Illyricus and covered eighteen centuries of Christianity. This work was a large-scale collection of materials on church history collected from many European libraries. Soon after, the Catholic Church published Cardinal Baronius's "Analysis of Church Life". In his work, he sought to prove the purity of the Catholic Church and considered Constantine a model of a Christian ruler.

In the 17th century, large-scale works on the history of Christianity began to appear in the Lutheran and Catholic churches in Germany, and later in France and other countries.

In the East, works on church history were almost non-existent until the 19th century. However, as an exception, one can cite chroniclers who wrote about all state and church events. The most famous chronicler in Kievan Rus was the monk Nestor. However, there was no interest in the history of Christianity until the end of the 18th century. Church history was not taught not only in secular, but also in religious educational institutions.

A significant change was the very rapid development of Soviet history from the second half of the 19th century. As an example, the historical school formed at the Moscow Theological Academy stood out. It is enough to name Professor Gorky there, Filaret Chernigorsky, and later Professor Lebedev and his students. At the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, Professors Bolotov and Brilliantov, and at the Kiev Theological Academy, the Ternovsky brothers, were distinguished by their work.

Most of the works of Russian authors of this period were related to the history of Orthodoxy or early Christianity. The history of Western Christianity was not widely

described in these works, although at the end of the 19th century, translations of Western European books on the history of Christianity began to appear in Russia.

By the end of the 20th century, the history of Christianity as a discipline had many works of diverse nature. "The Bibliographic Guide" identifies some of them, as well as approaches to working with modern sources on the history of Christianity. In V.V. Bolotov's work "Lectures on the History of the Ancient Church.

### **Introduction to Church History" the author studied church historiography in sections:**

1. Greek church historiography: the main representative of which is the church father Eusebius of Caesarea, whose works such as "Libri chronicorum II" ("Books of Chronicles II"), "Chronicle", "Historia ecclesiastica" ("Church History") and "Vita Constantini" ("Life of Constantine") are noteworthy.

The author's "Chronicle" is divided into two parts

- 1) χρονολογία - "extensive introduction", excerpts from historical documents with a chronological system
- 2) χρονικοί κανόνες - synchronous tables.

In the *Historia ecclesiastica* ("Church History"), the historian tells about the events from the birth of Christianity to 324. In writing it, Eusebius used not only all the main church libraries of that time, but also state archives. This work of the author is considered a work that came into the world because all the information he collected did not fit into the chronicle. Theologian F.K. Baur assesses that Eusebius is as important for the history of the Christian church as Herodotus is for Greek history.

The successors of Eusebius's work in the field of historiography are scholars who lived a hundred years after him. During the reign of Theodosius the Younger, a number of church historians appeared in a particularly short period of time.

One of the first was the Arian historian Philostorgius, who lived around 425 and wrote 12 books beginning with the letters of his name. The following works of the presbyter Hesychius of Jerusalem and Philip have not been preserved. After them, Socrates creates his "Church History" consisting of 7 books, Jeremiah Sozomen 9 books and Theodoret 5 books.

In Byzantine history, interest in church affairs weakened, and church and political events were reported together.

Procopius of Caesarea worked during the reign of Justinian. His works were based on military events, and he wrote 2 "De bello Persico" ("War with the Persians"), 2 "De bello Vandalico" ("War with the Vandals"), 4 "De bello Gothico" ("War with the Goths"), which described all of Justinian's campaigns.

Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople creates the work "Istoria súntomo\_s" ("Brief History"), covering the period from 610 to 769. In addition, his work "Xronografikón súntomon" ("Brief Chronicle") contains a list of the patriarchs and kings of the Old and New Testaments, their years of reign.

2. Latin church historiography: Latin literature on church history in antiquity reflected the strong influence of Greek literature. Indeed, almost all the major works of Greek literature were translated into Latin, including Eusebius' "Church History", the works

of Socrates, Sozomen and Theodorite. Eusebius' work was translated in 410 by Rufinus, and the works of Socrates, Sozomen and Theodorite by the scholastic Epiphanius. Later, under the influence of Greek literature, an independent Latin historiography began to develop. Lactantius's "De mortibus persecutorum" ("On the Death of Persecutors") was one of the first, the main idea of which was to show that all the emperors who persecuted Christians suffered a painful death. It is also appropriate to cite Paul Orosius's "Historiarum contra paganos libri septem" ("Seven Books of Stories Against the Pagans") as an example.

#### Church historiography in Eastern languages

- Syrian church historiography: Among the Eastern Christian peoples, Aramaic or Syriac is undoubtedly considered the most ancient, since the language of Jesus Christ was Aramaic and Christianity was first spread among the peoples who spoke this language. The first of the Syrian historical writers is considered to be Bishop Maruta, who wrote the history of the martyrs and the Council of Nicaea. However, the originals of Maruta's works have not survived. Among the works that have survived in full at present, the chronicle of the historian Stolpnik is the most important. He wrote a memoir of his time, which he called "On the Disasters that Befell My City of Edessa and All Mesopotamia". Another was the Syrian Gregory Abul-Faraj, whose main two-part historical work, "The Chronicle", contains all his and his predecessors' research in the field of history. The first part, devoted to civil and political history, is known as the "Chronicon syriacum," and was published in 1789 by P.I. Bruns and G.W. Kirsch. The second volume contains the history of the Syrian Church, as well as the Nestorians and the Patriarchate of Antioch, and was published by J.B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy.
- Egyptian church historiography was not particularly distinguished from others, only the lives and monographs of saints were written there, but no complete history was presented.

The physician and historian Said ibn al-Batrik wrote a history of the church in Arabic. This chronicle is called the "Contextio gemmarum" ("Combination of Precious Pearls") and covers the period from Adam to 937. Abu-Shuqr Peter ibn-ur-Rahib, deacon of the Cairo church, compiled the "Chronicon Orientale" in 1258, which contains a list of Old Testament events and the names of the reigning rulers.

Ethiopian Church Historiography. Ethiopian literature provides very little information for church history. Among the surviving translation monuments, the most remarkable is the chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu. This chronicle was translated into Ethiopian from the Arabic text in 1602. John's work covers the period from the creation of the world to the conquest of Egypt and consists of 122 chapters. It can be seen in three main sections: the first - the period before the reign of Constantine the Great, the second - up to the time of Emperor Phocas and the third - the remaining periods.

Modern scholars use a wide range of methods in the study of early Christianity: historical-critical text analysis, archaeological research, social history, etc.

The main topics of modern research:



- The history of Jesus Christ: researchers try to separate the historical facts in the gospel stories from mythological elements;
- The social history of early Christianity: scholars study the social conditions of the emergence and development of Christianity, the relations of Christian communities with the Roman state and other social groups;
- The role of women in early Christianity is studied with particular attention;
- Gnosticism and early Christianity: researchers analyze the relationship between Christianity and Gnostic movements;
- The archeology of early Christianity: archaeological finds allow us to reconstruct the material culture of the early Christians.

### **Another approach to studying early Christianity is the chronology of the centuries:**

#### **Antiquity and the Middle Ages:**

- Church Fathers: Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom, etc. They were not only theologians, but also historians who sought to record and explain early Christian beliefs and practices
- Church historians: Eusebius of Caesarea wrote the "History of the Church", which covered the period from the time of the apostles to the beginning of the 4th century.
- Modern period:
- Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, etc., although they paid more attention to theological issues, also contributed to the study of early Christianity by critically examining the traditions of the Catholic Church.
- 19th century:
- Historical-critical method: This method, developed in the 19th century, allowed scholars to take a more serious approach to the study of historical sources, including biblical texts;
- Friedrich Nietzsche. Although his views were controversial, he had a significant impact on the study of early Christianity, criticizing its moral teachings.

#### **20th century:**

- Adolf von Harnack - one of the founders of the scientific study of early Christianity. He studied the Greco-Roman roots of Christianity;
- Rudolf Bultmann - a German theologian known for his theory of demythologizing, which sought to separate the historical core of the Gospels from the mythological layers.

#### **21st century:**

Modern studies of early Christianity are characterized by the use of advanced methods. Scholars have actively used archaeology, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines to study early Christian communities.

- Bart D. Ehrman: One of the leading modern scholars of early Christianity, known for his work "The Historical Jesus and the Development of the New Testament";

- N.T. Wright: an English theologian who proposed a new interpretation of early Christianity, emphasizing its Jewish roots and historical context;
- Elaine Pagels: American scholar specializing in "Gnosticism and its relationship to early Christianity."

Travel scholars and geographers have also contributed to the study of early Christian communities. Over the centuries, countless pilgrims have traveled to places associated with early Christianity, such as the Holy Land, Rome, and Constantinople. For example, explorers such as Marco Polo (1254-1324) and Ibn Battuta (1304-1377) traveled extensively throughout the Middle East and other regions. Their writings provide insight into the various Christian communities they encountered. For example, the travels of Marco Polo, the famous 13th-century Venetian traveler and author of the travelogue "Book of the Wonders of the World" ("Livres des merveilles du monde"), take place mainly in Asia, where Buddhism, Islam, and Taoism prevailed. However, Marco Polo mentions the existence of Christian communities belonging to Nestorianism. Nestorianism was one of the branches of Christianity that spread to Asia in the first centuries of the Common Era. Polo notes their presence in regions such as Central Asia and China.

Among the scientists who have conducted research within the framework of Christianity in Uzbekistan, we can cite N. Nizomiddinov, E. Ibragimov, O. Hasanboev, J. Najmiddinov. Candidate of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor E. Ibragimov in his dissertation entitled "The Activity of Christian Confessions in Uzbekistan and Their Role in the Formation of Traditions of Religious Tolerance" studied the history of the formation of Christian confessions, their entry and activity in Uzbekistan, and the role of Christian confessions in strengthening religious tolerance.

## Conclusion

As noted by the President of our Republic, Sh. Mirziyoyev, "We continue to consider strengthening solidarity between religious confessions and civil harmony in our society as our most urgent and noble task." It follows that in order to further strengthen interfaith tolerance and understand modern global processes, it is necessary to know the history and modern activities of religious confessions, including the activities of Christian organizations.

It is worth noting that the views of scientists about early Christianity are constantly evolving, and new discoveries can lead to a revision of existing theories.



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