

Why is the Bible central to Christianity?

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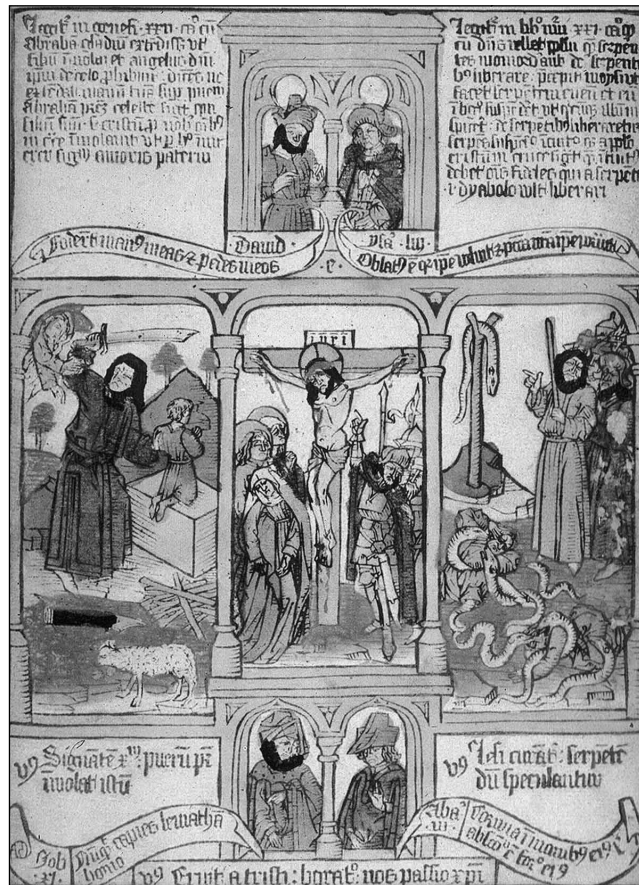


Fig. 1.1. A page from a fifteenth-century blockbook called a *Biblia Pauperum*. Because the meaning of Jesus relates to the Old Testament, the crucifixion is flanked by two Old Testament stories: God saving Isaac from child sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-14), and Moses displaying a bronze serpent to cure Israelites from snakebite (Num. 21:4-9).

◆ An answer from a scholar

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) was a Romanian historian of religion renowned for his analyses of religious experience. In his 1963 book *Myth and Reality*¹ Eliade described **myths** as traditional stories that narrate sacred history. By relating what occurred at the origin of life or at the beginning of a society, a myth indicates the highest cultural values; it provides answers to the question of the origin of evil, offers a model for exemplary behavior, and explains and interprets death. Such myths are true, not in the sense that they are factually accurate, but rather in the sense that they convey essential values. Myths are told through the generations to maintain communal identity from parents to children, to pass down a particular vision of how to achieve the good life, and to elevate human life by connection with the **divine**.

myth = a traditional story told to convey cultural values

divine = an extraordinary power beyond what is human

For the man of the archaic societies, the essential thing is to know the myths. It is essential not only because myths provide him with an explanation of the World and his own mode of being in the World, but above all because, by recollecting the myths, by re-enacting them, he is able to repeat what the Gods, the Heroes, of the Ancestors did *ab origine*. To know the myths is to learn not only how things came into existence but also where to find them and how to make them reappear when they disappear.—Mircea Eliade²

Eliade taught that groups rehearse these myths during communal **rituals**. By celebrating the myth in a festival with storytelling, feasting, singing, performance, and games, the community renews its communal bonds, experiences something of the power of the first creation, and instills yet again the positive values celebrated in the story. Without the communal repetition of myths, humans are less than they might be, since these cultural stories of beginnings and endings, struggles and victories, villains and heroes give layers of meaning to individual and communal existence. Prayers also refer to the myths; for example, to heal a sick person now, the deity is asked to re-create a perfect world. It is as if telling the **sacred** story renews the life of the believer, who can be transformed by primordial powers. According to Eliade, all religions have myths. Although one religion may judge the myths of another religion to be false tales, the believing community honors its sacred stories as religiously true and conveying extraordinary power for them.

Using Eliade, one can say that Christianity finds its treasured myths in the **Bible**. Eliade described various types of myths, all of which can be found in the Bible. Cosmological myths tell about the origin of the universe; Genesis 1, Genesis 2, Job 38–39, Psalm 104, Proverbs 8, and John 1 describe

in different ways the creation of the world. Etiological myths describe how something came to be; for example, in Gen. 9:13, the phenomenon of the rainbow is explained as God's bow (as in bow and arrow) placed in the sky to become a sign of promise, rather than a threatening weapon. Eschatological myths describe how the world will come to its end; Mark 13 and the Book of Revelation are examples of biblical descriptions of the end of all things. Transformation myths illustrate how persons survive disasters and are changed into something better than they were: the long narrative in Exodus tells how a group of slaves became a free nation, and Scripture includes many transformational tales in which Jesus healed people who were sick, maimed, demon-possessed, and even dead. Both happy and sad historical memories, for example the remembrance of the **martyrs**, are connected with the transformative power of Jesus.

Biblical references use a numbering system that was made up by Stephen Langton in the thirteenth century. For example, "John 3:16" means the Gospel according to John, the third chapter, the sixteenth verse.

ritual = a repeated symbolic communal activity

sacred = embodying and conveying divine power

martyr = a person killed because of religious conviction

Bible/Scripture = a compilation of some seventy books held to be sacred and authoritative in Christianity

Gospel/gospel = (uppercase G) a biblical book that narrates the meaning of the life of Jesus; (lowercase g) the good news that God saves the world through Jesus; a style of American religious music characterized by simple melody and harmony and rigorous beat

A summary of the contents of the Bible

Old Testament / Hebrew Scriptures:

5 books of Moses and the law, the "Pentateuch"

12 books of history, about the years

1150–500 BCE

17 books about and oracles from preachers,
"the prophets"

5 books of maxims and poetry, called "Wisdom
writings"

Some churches add:

7 books from 300–100 BCE, "the apocrypha,"
"deuterocanonical"

New Testament

4 **Gospels**

1 history

21 letters, often called epistles

1 book of visions

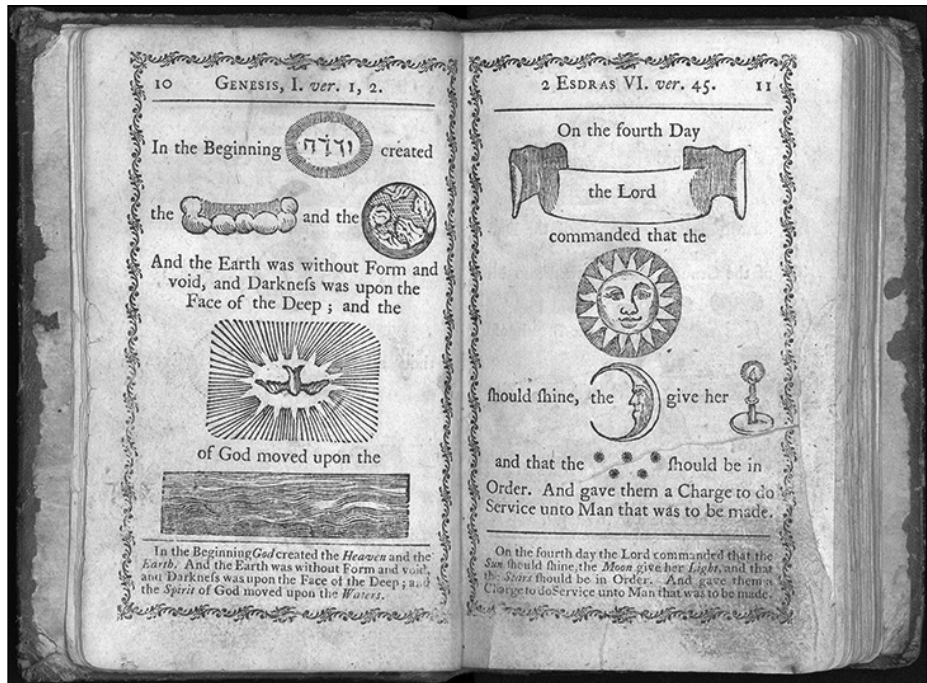


Fig. 1.2. Hieroglyphick Bibles, such as this one printed in 1788 by Isaiah Thomas, were popular in early America for teaching children Bible stories.

Christians focus on whichever biblical myths best instill their own values. For many centuries, the most significant cosmological myth for Christians was in Genesis 2. The well-known story tells how God shaped a male out of the dirt of the ground (the Hebrew word *adamah* means soil), and because the man was lonely, God created the animals, but finally created a female out of the male's rib. Instructed by Eliade, one can say that this myth stressed the following values: males are superior to females; the female belongs to the male; and at death humans return to the earth. Whether or not persons think of this story as factual, its values might be maintained as true. However, recently Christians have focused on the cosmological myth in Genesis 1. In this telling, after all the animals are created, God creates males and females at the same time. Both bear what is called "the image of God," and God blesses them simultaneously. This myth suggests gender equality, and it stresses humans' connection with God, rather than with the soil. Eliade stressed that whichever are the treasured myths, so will be the values of that religious community.

◆ Answers from the churches

Christian churches teach that the Bible is of primary importance. The reading of Scripture is one of the main components of all Christian **worship**. Proclaiming the Bible instructs the community in its faith. Scripture is a major source for theological reflection. Meditation on Scripture is a foundation for personal devotion. Memorized Bible passages become daily prayers. So what are the contents of the Bible, and how is Scripture interpreted?

worship = a ritual by which believers honor God and unite their community

What are the contents of the Old Testament?

The Christian Bible began at least 2500 years ago when the Hebrews, an ancient Near Eastern ethnic and religious community, told its memories and recorded its worldview first orally, and then in written form. Later in history, the Hebrews were called Israelites, and still later **Jews**. Over the centuries of living in the Near and Middle East, this group eventually compiled its most treasured stories into the Hebrew Scriptures, called by Christians the Old Testament. These Scriptures include: stories of their origin as descendants of Abraham and Sarah, who lived about 1800 BCE; their escape from Egyptian slavery in perhaps 1250 BCE; their occupation of Canaan, the lands east of the Mediterranean Sea; the establishment of a kingdom that was most successful under King David in 1000 BCE; their final military defeat by 587 BCE; their deportation to the enemy lands; and their eventual return to their land. Important in Israelite memory are God's **covenant** of care for the people, a law of commands given by God, ritual worship centered in the temple in Jerusalem, and instruction and oracles preached by the **prophets**. The various written texts, although composed over a millennium, share a primary theme—that God is to be worshiped as the giver of life who expects moral behavior, yet is perpetually forgiving. God is both just and merciful.

Jews = the descendants of Judah, a great-grandson of Abraham, as ethnic identity or religious community

covenant = the mutual commitment between God and the people

prophet = a person speaking for God about present behavior and future outcomes

Many scholars agree that much of the work by which the Jews compiled their stories into an authorized sacred book took place after 600 BCE when, the Jews having been deported and with no access to the temple in Jerusalem, they needed to clarify what their religious community was all about. This editing effort is apparent in the story of the flood in Gen. 6:9–9:17. The content of Gen. 6:5–8, which refers to God as “the LORD” (in Hebrew, *YHWH*), is repeated in 6:11–13, which refers to

God as “God” (in Hebrew, *Elohim*). In the God story (see 6:19), there is one pair of each animal, and in the LORD story (7:2), there are seven pairs of ritually clean animals and one pair of ritually unclean animals. Many biblical scholars conclude that two different versions of the flood story were interleaved into one account, and this editing was organized by rabbis hoping to secure their traditional memories, without which their identity might be lost. For the last two hundred years, scholars have worked to trace four main sources that were compiled into the current text of the Hebrew Scriptures, to date these different sources, and to understand the similarities and differences between them.

By the first century of the Common Era, the Roman Empire controlled all the land surrounding the Mediterranean, including the eastern shore lands in which many Jews resided. In the year 70, squelching attempts of Jewish revolutionaries to regain their independence, the Roman armies destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and in about 90, responding to this situation of devastation, Jewish rabbis authorized the final form of their Scriptures for religious use. Today, when Jews gather in synagogues, they read from and comment upon this **canon**, referred to with the acronym Tanakh: the T refers to the books of the law, the Torah; the N to the books of the prophets (in Hebrew, *Nebiim*); and the K the books of songs and poetic writings (in Hebrew, *Kethubim*). When the New Testament mentions “the Scriptures,” it means the Tanakh.

canon = the approved and authorized list of biblical books

What are the contents of the New Testament?

Many Jews expected that God would keep the promise to send a leader who, like Moses, would save them from enemy domination. One person who aroused considerable interest in this regard was a first-century itinerant preacher and healer named Jesus from Nazareth. All the first-century accounts of Jesus that have survived into our century were written by his followers. Many questions that contemporary people have regarding Jesus are not answered in these early accounts.

the kingdom of God = a complex biblical term that refers to the realm of divine authority, not merely spatial nor temporal; also called “the kingdom of heaven”

These accounts do say that he traveled throughout the eastern shore lands of the Mediterranean, preaching about the arrival of what is termed “**the kingdom of God.**” Jesus both taught traditional Jewish beliefs and challenged some current religious practices. He told **parables**, healed the sick, and acted in countercultural ways, for example by eating with disreputable persons and by welcoming women into his circle. His **disciples** believed him to be the Christ, the one anointed by God

to save the Jews, and they said that his **miracles** proved that he demonstrated divine power. Yet he was convicted in a religious court of blasphemy and in a Roman civil trial of sedition, and he was executed by crucifixion in about 30 CE. After his burial, his followers claimed that God had raised him from death to a new and transformed life, and that this future was open to all who believed in him. People in the Jesus movement spoke to others about their faith in his resurrection, and within several decades people began to write out their memories and interpretations of Jesus. Thus began the New Testament.

The earliest books in the New Testament, which were composed in Greek, the primary written language of the Roman Empire, are letters that Paul and anonymous church leaders wrote to other Christians to clarify **doctrine** and to counsel them about controversies.

Scholars judge that these letters were written between 50 and the early second century. Some of the letters follow a first-century pattern in which a student wrote in the name of the teacher: what is now called plagiarism was considered honor to the teacher. Thus some New Testament writings, written under the name of Paul or Peter, may have been written after their deaths by their followers. Because these letters and essays are the earliest Christian writings, they were and remain extremely significant for the church. Although the letters agree about some beliefs, the twenty-one essays differ from one another on other issues, and so through the centuries church leaders have debated the relative value of various passages of these letters.

Paul taught that humans need to be connected with God; that because of **sin** humans cannot achieve this on their own; that the gospel proclaims to the world that Jesus' death and resurrection **reconciles** humankind to God; that believers are now **justified** before the judgment of God; that Christ grants an extraordinary existence to all participants in the community of believers, both Jews and **Gentiles**, who receive his Spirit; and that finally through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, death itself is conquered. Paul, originally a devout practicing Jew, taught that through Jesus Christ, God's promises in the Hebrew Scriptures were realized and were available now to all

parable = a short anecdote with a surprising religious message

disciple = a follower of Jesus; sometimes referring to an inner circle of twelve men

miracle = an extraordinary event beyond nature, caused by divine intervention

doctrine = the authoritative belief of an association

Blessed Lord, which has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our savior Jesus Christ.—Thomas Cranmer, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1549

sin = the human situation of distance from God and disobedience of divine commands

to reconcile = to restore peace in a situation of conflict

to justify = to make right before the law

Gentile = a person who is not Jewish

peoples of the world. Some historians claim that Christianity owes more to Paul's writings than it does to memories about Jesus.

Although not composed first, the four Gospels are placed first in the New Testament. Most biblical scholars agree that the Gospels were written three to eight decades after the life of Jesus and after a period of the oral transmission of stories. Although many people know the four Gospels somehow blended together or imaginatively amplified through feature



Fig. 1.3. The crucifix in a Roman Catholic Church in China. Most Christian artists depict Jesus as resembling those believers who see the image. Here Jesus wears a traditional Chinese topknot.

films, each Gospel is like a theological painting of the meaning of Jesus, in some ways similar and in interesting ways different from the other Gospels. In all four, the last two days of Jesus' life are covered in great detail. The writers did not sign their work: the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the names that tradition has given to the texts. None of the four **evangelists** claims to have known Jesus or been part of the original Jesus movement. Yet all four describe Jesus in ultimate terms, as the one from God who gives life to the world and who changes the self and the community utterly.

Most scholars agree that Mark was the earliest full Gospel. Written in about 70 perhaps at Rome, the Gospel records the faith of Christians who for nearly forty years had believed that Jesus, the messiah sent by God, had to suffer and die in order to save humankind (8:27–9:50). In Mark, Jesus preaches the coming of the kingdom of God, although the term is not defined. Mark includes no birth narratives, and the original text of Mark had no resurrection appearances. That Jesus is the Christ, and in a mysterious way God, remains a secret. God gives to the community of believers, who now face persecution, a share in the life given to the world through Jesus, who was himself persecuted to death. In Mark, Jesus is the hidden messiah.

evangelist = the author of a Christian gospel; also, a preacher to the unchurched

Most scholars agree that about ten years later, the author of Matthew expanded on Mark for an especially Jewish audience. Repeatedly the evangelist quotes a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, to prove that Jesus is the messiah that some Jews sought. According to Matthew's **Christology**, Jesus is like Moses, a great lawgiver and intermediary who conveys God's will to the people, with his Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7) a parallel to the words of Moses from Mount Sinai. Like the greatest prophets, Jesus can perform miracles, and through his death, God set up a new covenant, by which believers encounter God as both just and merciful. Matthew includes several stories about Jesus' infancy and two post-resurrection appearances. For Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses.

Perhaps a decade after Matthew, Luke penned his Gospel. In his introduction (1:1–4) he describes his “investigating everything carefully from the very first.”³ Only Luke includes many well-known stories about Jesus: for example, the angel coming to Mary, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, parables like the **Good Samaritan** (10:25–37), and Jesus forgiving the thief crucified next to him (23:41–43). Luke, writing especially for a Gentile audience, describes Jesus as the Savior, a term familiar in Roman paganism. Meal clubs were popular in the Roman Empire, and Luke tells many

Christology = a theory explaining what it means that Jesus is the Christ

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done on earth as in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
 Save us from the time of trial
 and deliver us from evil.
 For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
 now and forever. Amen

—the 1988 version by the English Language
 Liturgical Consultation of the slightly different
 texts in Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4

the Good Samaritan = in a parable of Jesus, the hated outsider who cares for the man in need

ascension = Jesus' return to the realm of God and thus no longer being visible on earth

apostle = a prominent Christian preacher

synoptics = the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, similar in content and order

stories of Jesus eating with both followers and public sinners. Luke stresses Jesus' compassion in healing the sick and forgiving sinners. For Luke, Jesus is the loving Savior. The only evangelist who describes Jesus' **ascension**, Luke also wrote the Acts of the **Apostles**, a book included in the Bible about the early Christian church. Because of the similarity of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they are grouped together as the **synoptics**.

Perhaps ten to twenty years later, the fourth evangelist edited the theology of his community. In John's Gospel, Jesus is unequivocally divine, the presence of God on earth. In place of any birth narratives, John's opening poem borrows from Greek philosophy to call Jesus **Logos**, the Word of God from before the creation of the world. In John, Jesus delivers lengthy poetic speeches that develop "I am" metaphors, for example, "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "I am the gate for the sheep" (10:7): the hearer is expected to know that one translation of the Hebrew name of God, *YHWH*, is "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14). In the synoptics, Jesus' last supper was a celebration of the Jewish feast of Passover, but in John, Jesus was crucified the day before Passover, while the lambs were

being slaughtered for the feast. Only in John is Jesus buried in a garden. After the crucifixion, John describes the risen Christ appearing to his followers on the first day of the week. For John, Jesus is God.



Fig. 1.4. A page from the *Book of Kells*, which contains the four Gospels, handwritten and illustrated in Ireland in the seventh century. The winged man stands for Matthew, the lion for Mark, the ox for Luke, and the eagle for John: see Rev. 4:6-7.

Several of the New Testament letters that were written late in the first century and early in the second century dealt with emerging issues of church organization and behavior. These general writings, sometimes called “**catholic**,” addressed the tensions arising between Christians and the wider culture. Since the world had not yet come to an end, Christians had to develop rules for the church, such as who could serve as **bishops**, and codes of conduct that included even details about what clothing women were to wear. Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, describes a detailed vision of the end of the world. Scholars disagree about its

Logos = Greek for “word,” a title used in Greek philosophy for the emanation of God on earth and important in early Christologies

catholic = (lowercase c) pertaining to all Christians universally;
Catholic = (uppercase C) part of the name of one church

bishop = overseer of a geographical grouping of churches

theologian = a person learned in the study of God

meanings, and **theologians** differ concerning its significance. Some churches attend closely to its symbolic language about the future, and other churches judge the book unhelpful for contemporary believers and seldom read or interpret it.

How did all these books become the Bible?

In the second century, two different proposals attempted to simplify Scripture for Christians. A man named Marcion suggested that Christians no longer needed the Old Testament. This would radically shorten the sacred text. But he was condemned by church leaders who instead judged that the New Testament continued and amplified the Old Testament, and that without knowing the Hebrew Scriptures, readers could not understand the vocabulary used by the New Testament authors. Another man named Tatian thought that having four Gospels was confusing. Knowing that in some ways their content was mutually contradictory, Tatian compiled the four into one account and omitted the passages that seemed not to fit. But his proposal too was rejected by church leaders, who valued the four different Christologies of the Gospels. An influential second-century bishop named Irenaeus argued that some Christians had developed false doctrines because they had focused on only one of the four Gospels to the exclusion of the others.

Originally, each of the books in both Old and New Testament was handwritten on its own scroll. But already in the second century the four Gospels and the letters of Paul were handwritten on sheets of animal skins or papyrus and, for easy reference in worship and study, were bound together in what were called codexes, what are now called books. During the second and third centuries, theologians and bishops discussed which writings were authoritative enough that they could be read aloud when the community gathered for worship. It was not until 367, at a meeting of bishops, that one prominent bishop named Athanasius proposed what is the current list of Christian books—which would be added to the Hebrew Scriptures as the full canon for Christians.

The main criterion used in deciding which books were worthy of canonization was their closeness to the testimony of the apostles. Theologians rejected other accounts of the life of Jesus that they judged fanciful, for example the Gospel of Peter, in which the cross of Jesus itself talks. Athanasius's proposal was accepted. Although no church **council** has ever decreed that the Bible is a closed collection of books and should not be added to, in fact no other books have been added to the list since the fourth century, and churches have taught

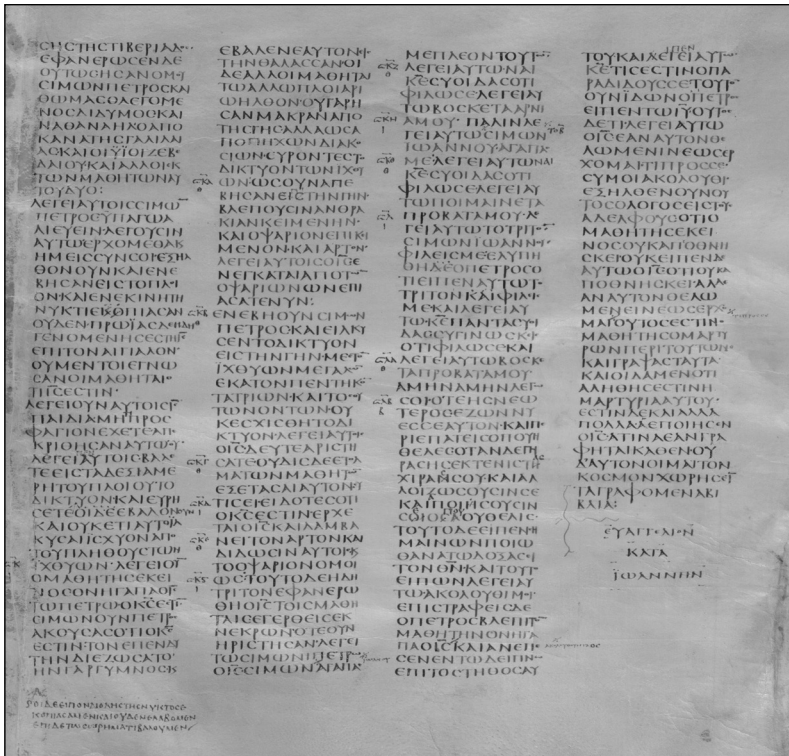


Fig. 1.5. A page from the fourth-century manuscript *Codex Sinaiticus*. Note that in the Greek, there are no spaces between words.

that all other religious books have far less authority than those on the fourth-century list. Recently some scholars have studied the noncanonical books from the second and third centuries with great interest, hoping to learn about the many variations within early Christianity. Yet believers tend to trust that God led the early theologians to make the right decisions, and that the Bible as it is will continue to serve the church well.

council = a meeting of bishops to decide on controversial issues

How have Christians interpreted the Bible?

What has replaced other books being added to the Bible is the perpetual interpretation of the Scripture. Anyone who reads the whole Bible sees its complexity. Composed over about a thousand years by many authors in different life situations, the books carry a dominant theme but through many permutations. The texts themselves indicate that their authors and editors were choosing what and how to write. Yet throughout Christian history, believers have

maintained that Scripture is the word of God. This metaphoric term suggests that God has a mouth and was literally talking in some language. To explain this term, most churches teach that God inspired the authors, and that everything necessary for faith is conveyed through this word of God, even though this word arose from different writers over many centuries. An alternate interpretation is that God miraculously dictated the Bible and that thus, at least in its original form, it is **inerrant**.

inerrant = having no errors

Interpretation of the Christian message began even before the New Testament was written down. Jesus and his movement spoke Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew; yet Jesus' words are recorded in Greek. Anyone who speaks several languages knows that translations cannot be absolutely precise, since grammar differs and vocabulary reflects a specific worldview. All translation involves interpretation to some degree. Thus although some Christians prefer Bibles that have Jesus' words printed in red, other Christians consider that at best these words are English translations of Greek translations of what Jesus may have said in Aramaic.

The task of translation continued. Although in some religions the sacred text is never to be translated but rather memorized in its original language, no Christian churches have required believers to learn first-century Greek in order to read the Bible. In Greek-speaking communities, New Testament Greek is maintained, although of course in Greece the language developed and changed through the centuries. The first famous full translation of the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible into the language of the common people of the western half of Europe was completed by a biblical scholar named Jerome in 405. This translation of the Bible into Latin is called the **Vulgate** (think of the "vulgar" people!), and this translation was officially used by the Roman Catholic Church until the 1960s.

Vulgate = the fifth-century Latin translation of the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible

In Anglo-Saxon, the English language of the year 700: "Aelc thara the thas min word gehierth, and tha wyrcth, bith gelic thaem wisan were, se his hus ofer stan getimbrode." For help in reading this, check Matt. 7:24.

Throughout Christian history, innumerable unofficial translations of at least the Gospels into other languages were made. With the printing press introduced in Europe in 1450 and literacy newly important in society, Christians in several countries translated the entire Bible into their vernacular language. An early famous translation into German was published by Martin Luther in 1534, and its popularity was instrumental in bringing about a split in the European church into Roman Catholics, who maintained their use of the Vulgate, and Protestants, who protested for the availability of the Bible in their language. By 1536 William Tyndale had

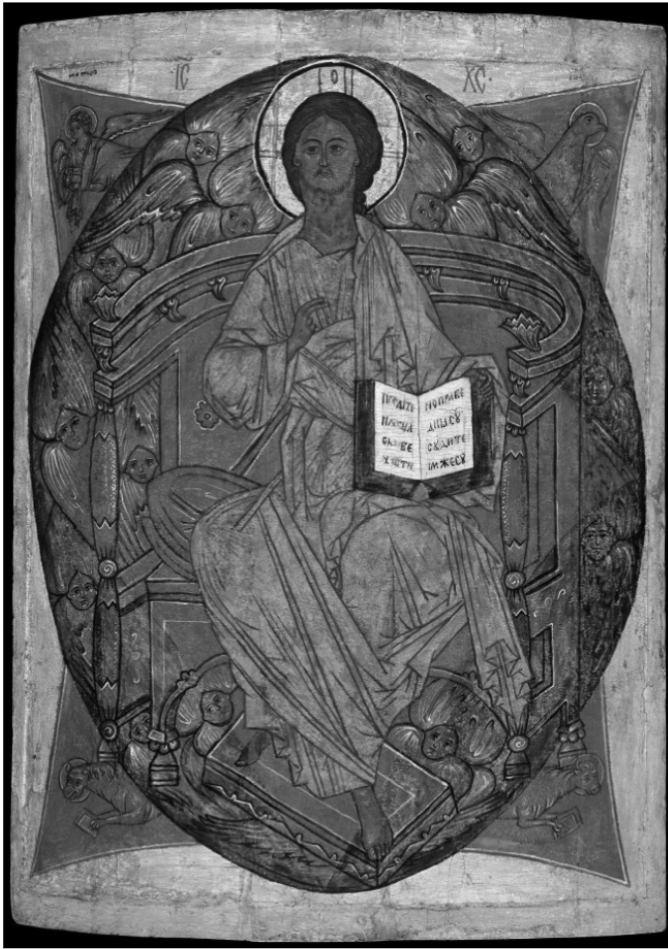


Fig. 1.6. In this Eastern Orthodox image, Christ is holding a Bible open to Matt. 9:28, “Come to me.”

translated most of the Bible into English, but he was burned at the stake for his work, and Miles Coverdale completed the effort. That biblical translators could be martyred indicates how important the Bible was, both to those undertaking the massive task of translation and to those who forbade vernacular translations. Over the last 1500 years, many of the world’s oral languages have been given written alphabets by Christian **missionaries** and linguists in order that the Bible could be rendered into this speech. By the early twenty-first century, over one-third of the world’s 6,900 languages have at least part of the Bible translated into their tongue, and this covers about 98 percent of the world’s population.

missionary = a person preaching Christianity in a foreign location

KJV = the 1611 translation into English of the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible

The most famous English translation is called the **KJV**, the 1611 King James Version. James, the king of England from 1603 to 1625, authorized a translation for use in the Church of England, and still today some Protestants prefer its beautiful, albeit archaic, speech. It is interesting that when the KJV was completed, the use of “thou, thine, thee” for “you, your, you” was already passing out of the vernacular, but the committee decided to retain this old-fashioned way to address one’s beloved family, friends, and God, as a way to lend a tone of tradition to the new translation.

In the twentieth century, many biblical translations were published. Some attempt to keep the translation as close as possible to the wording and syntax of the Hebrew and Greek. Others try to make the sense of the passage readily available to contemporary readers. So, for example, some translations render what the Greek calls “the third hour of the day” as “nine o’clock in the morning.” Some churches approve one translation as most appropriate for use in worship. A translation preferred by a scholar may be different from the one chosen to accompany daily devotion.

Yet translation is only one of the techniques used in biblical interpretation. Each week at public Christian worship, just as in the Jewish synagogue, the leader of the community is expected to comment upon the biblical text that was read aloud, explaining what it means for the contemporary community. Many **clergy** wrote out their **sermons**, and one can read 1900 years of such homilies to discover how the Bible was being interpreted. Over the centuries various methods of training preachers have developed, so that clergy can be experts on the Bible and the history of doctrine and interpretation. Some churches require their clergy to learn Hebrew and Greek, in order that they can study the original text.

clergy = trained and designated leaders of a Christian community; variously called father, minister, mother, pastor, preacher, teaching elder

Another vehicle for biblical interpretation involves the very choices of which Scripture to proclaim in public worship. The Bible is a hugely long book, and most Christian teachers have judged that much of it, although interesting to study, is not important enough for believers that it ought to be read aloud and commented on in worship. For example, churches do not read aloud the instructions on what to do with a building if its walls have leprosy (Leviticus 14). In some churches, the preacher can choose which part of the Bible to read and

sermon/homily = an explanation of the meaning of a biblical text

John 3:16 in several translations:

For God louede so the world that he yaf his oon bigetun sone, that ech man that beliueth in him perische not, but haue euerlastynge llijf.—John Wyclif, 1384

For God so loveth the world, that he hath given his only son, that none that believe in him, should perish, but should have everlasting life.—Tyndale-Coverdale, 1535

For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.—New Jerusalem Bible, 1985

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.—New Revised Standard Version, 1991

This is how much God loved the world: he gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.—Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, 1993

comment upon. Other churches have prepared and authorized a **lectionary** that their clergy are expected to adhere to. Most likely, churches that differ with regard to which passages are read aloud and which are omitted from worship also differ in their opinion about which passages are applicable to contemporary Christian belief. Some churches stress passages that describe eternal punishment, and others do not. In places that maintained slaves, clergy used verses such as Ephesians 6:5-9 as a biblical defense of slavery, and in the twentieth century, churches that opposed women's equality preached on those passages that taught male superiority (for example, Eph.

lectionary = the list of biblical selections appointed for worship; the volume in which these selections are printed sequentially

A long, stupid sermon from that insufferable bore, Mr Garie, gave me a dreadful head ache. He repeated everything at least three times, until I was wild with irritated nerves and impatience. Invariably, the most beautiful passages of the bible, those I cry over alone, appear absurd from his lips.—Sarah Morgan, 1862⁺

5:22-30), while those who sought women's rights preached about women's role in early Christianity (especially excerpts from Luke).

Two opposite **hermeneutical** directions that assist preachers for their weekly task have been evident throughout the church since the second century. The theologians in Antioch (in current Turkey) preferred a literal approach, stressing the historical accuracy of the biblical stories, and the theologians in Alexandria, Egypt, preferred a more allegorical approach, by which metaphoric passages are important for the faith. Thus some preachers taught that it is most

important to believe that Jesus miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44), while others stressed the meaning of this story, that through Christ all believers are given new life. The preeminent Christian theologian Augustine wrote in his autobiography that he first took the Christian religion seriously when he heard the preaching of Ambrose, the bishop of

Milan, because Ambrose gave "spiritual" interpretations of biblical texts, rather than the more common literal ones.⁵ During the sixteenth century, Roman Catholics, early Protestant followers of Martin Luther, and later Protestant

hermeneutics = a method of interpretation

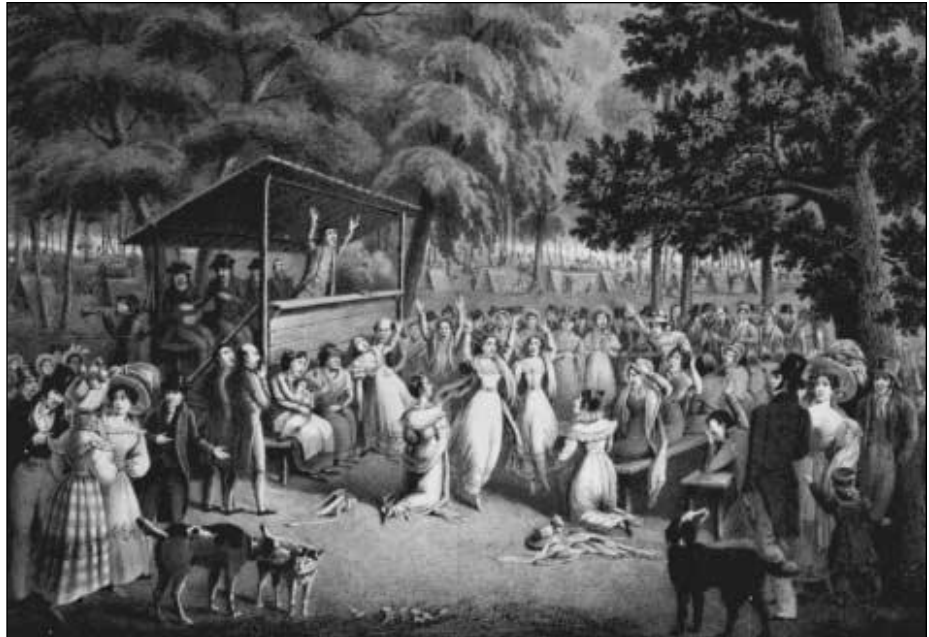


Fig. 1.7. A nineteenth-century drawing depicting the 1801 Revival in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, a famous six-day-long camp meeting that included preaching to the 12,000 people present.

followers of Ulrich Zwingli engaged in bitter battles, and their governments even martyred persons of the opposite position, about whether “this is my body,” the words of Jesus spoken at a meal with his disciples before his death, were more literal or more metaphoric.

From the nineteenth century on, these two methods of biblical interpretation became more oppositional. The more literal believers came to be called **fundamentalists**. For these churches and believers, the Bible is inerrant, and biblical stories are accepted as factually correct. The idea is that, for example, if God did not create the world in six days, as Genesis 1 says, then there is no reason for people to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, since, if the reliability of one claim in Scripture is questioned, then the reliability of the whole is in doubt. On the other hand, churches that adopt the more allegorical approach are less concerned about the historicity of biblical accounts, since they value religious metaphors, and they are not troubled when searching for a contemporary application of the Bible’s ancient worldview.

During the twentieth century, other new hermeneutical approaches became well known, either accepted or rejected. Christian feminists raised many questions about the male dominance in the biblical texts themselves. For example, in Luke 8:1-3, why are only twelve men highlighted, although several women are so important to Jesus’ work that they are named here? Such questions have encouraged some churches to alter their inherited patterns of male dominance. Christians who have dark skin color have challenged the biblical language pattern in which light is good and dark is evil. Pastoral counselors question especially parts of the Psalms in which sickness is viewed as divine punishment for sin. Because Christians take the Bible so seriously, they continue to struggle with its difficult passages, even while accepting its basic truth in their lives.

Another method of biblical interpretation has become increasingly important in Christianity. When printed Bibles became available to Christians who were not trained in the history of biblical interpretation, personal interpretation of Scripture became popular. One example is the method developed in the sixteenth century by Ignatius of Loyola, a Roman

Not one statement has ever been disproved by any real facts of science or history, and God will surely honor and bless the faith and witness of anyone who fully believes and obeys His Word. —Henry M. Morris and Martin E. Clark, *The Bible Has the Answer*⁶

fundamentalism = a method of religious conservatism that holds to literal scriptural interpretation and absolute trust in church authority

Metaphors and metaphorical narratives can be profoundly true even if they are not literally or factually true. Being a Christian is not about believing in the Bible or about believing in Christianity. Rather, it is about a deepening relationship with the God to whom the Bible points. —Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*⁷

Scripture still sometimes leaves me breathless. I see such honesty, such beauty, such profundity, such ultimacy. A grand cosmic tragedy with innumerable small scenes, but magnificent new life emerging out of it all.—Miriam Adeney⁸

Catholic who encouraged Christians to use their own imagination to enter into the biblical stories, so that for example they see themselves walking with Jesus. In those places where church authority was challenged, private interpretations could be preferred over official teaching. Christians resided for decades on the American frontier before churches were built, and their religious faith was nurtured as individuals read the Bible and undoubtedly interpreted it according to their own lights.

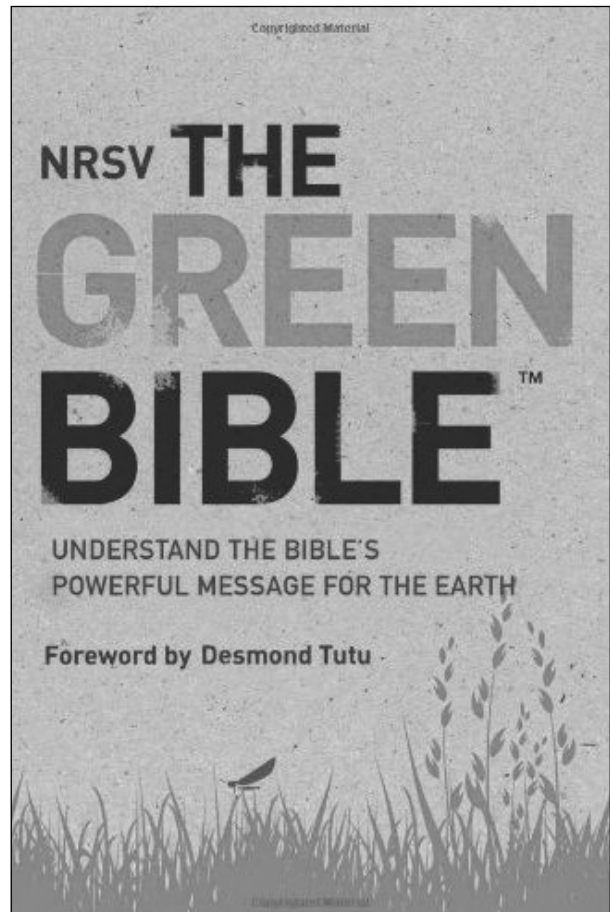


Fig. 1.8. Many different editions of the same Bible translation are available. Most include scholarly notes that are not part of the biblical text itself. This edition focuses on ecological concerns.

To conclude this chapter, a biblical verse: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). This passage suggests that the Bible does not contain everything that believers may wish for. Many readers are disappointed to discover what issues Scripture does not cover and what questions it does not answer. But according to John, the Bible was written so that people may come to faith and life in Jesus, and the church teaches that this is enough. So the Bible is read daily, proclaimed weekly at worship, and interpreted over and over in different ways, century after century.

Scripture is not just a holy book from which we extract teaching and biblical principles. Rather, it is a story in which we participate. Scripture speaks to us because Scripture speaks about us. We need to allow Scripture to become the interpreter of who we are in the specific concrete sense.—Kwame Bediako⁹

Suggestions

1. Review the chapter’s vocabulary: apostle, ascension, Bible, bishop, canon, catholic/Catholic, Christology, clergy, council, covenant, disciple, divine, doctrine, evangelist, fundamentalism, Gentile, Good Samaritan, Gospel/gospel, hermeneutics, homily, inerrant, Jew, justify, kingdom of God / of heaven, KJV, lectionary, *Logos*, martyr, miracle, missionary, myth, parable, prophet, reconcile, ritual, sacred, Scripture, sermon, sin, synoptics, theologian, Vulgate, worship.
2. Identify the myths of our society and the role they play in forming identity.
3. Present arguments for and against citing the Bible in a discussion of whether there are miracles in today’s world.
4. Compare the biblical accounts of Christ’s resurrection: 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-12; and John 20:1-18.
5. Write a personal essay in which you describe a book that has been important to you, and explain why.
6. In 1 Cor. 10:4, Paul interprets for Christians the story of the Israelites getting water from the rock (Exod. 17:1-7). Discuss Paul’s hermeneutic.
7. Read and discuss the short story “God’s Goodness” by Marjorie Kemper.¹⁰ A Christian caregiver and a dying teenage boy reflect on the biblical book of Job. To understand the story, an acquaintance with the Book of Job is helpful.

8. For a major project, read and write a report on the 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin. The characters think and speak in biblical terms. Use a King James Version concordance (an index of words in the Bible) to locate all the biblical sources in a paragraph or page.
9. View and discuss the 1995 movie *Dead Man Walking*. Citing the Bible is important to the religious sister who is counseling the man on death row, to the convict himself, and to both the supporters and the critics of capital punishment.

For Further Reading

- De Hamel, Christopher. *The Book: A History of the Bible*. London: Phaidon, 2001.
- Greenman, Jeffrey P., Timothy Larsen, and Stephen R. Spencer, eds. *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries: From the Early Church to John Paul II*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007.
- Sumney, Jerry L. *The Bible: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.