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978-0-521-86006-2 - The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 2: From 600 to 1450

Edited by Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

RICHARD MARSDEN

When the period that we call ‘medieval’ opened, the Bible – a canon of authoritative texts embodying the venerable traditions of Israel and the chronicles of the young Christian church – was already firmly established with all its complexities. Its subsequent developments were interwoven with both the religious and the secular history of the Mediterranean, the Near East and transalpine Europe. The medieval period was a long one, characterised by bewildering changes, at the end of which the shape of what is now identified as the modern world may be discerned. In 600, Christendom still enjoyed a broad measure of political and spiritual unity, and Islam was yet to appear. Byzantium was the leading Christian society in the East, while the evangelisation of the West continued apace, with much of northern and western Europe still in the process of conversion, though that would not take long. By 900, the unity of Christendom had gone and the schism between Constantinople and Rome, political at first and then doctrinal, too, had become one of its defining characteristics. The church of the East remained essentially Greek, in contrast to an increasingly confident Latin West, secure in its notions of papal authority and powered especially by the Carolingian empire. The challenge of Islam had by now been felt in the East and was encroaching ever westwards. By 1450, this threat had been contained and the schism between Rome and Constantinople had become irrelevant, for the Greek empire had dissolved. The western church had experienced its own disruptions and divisions, and papal authority, ever in a stand-off with princely powers, was now under serious threat from within. The agenda of the Reformation had been set.

In its myriad manifestations, the Bible was, by the end of our period, available to a wider (and more critical) audience than ever before. Early changes in script and in parchment preparation had enabled the production of more and cheaper volumes, and there had been a move from the monastic scriptorium to secular, ‘professional’ workshops. But if it had become cheaper and easier to produce manuscript Bibles, nevertheless the patronage of rulers and

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the wealthy aristocracy was still of enduring importance. The de luxe, iconic volumes which survive disproportionately were often gestures of political or doctrinal will; the Bible was both a symbol and a tool of power. The manuscript era was in fact drawing to a close, to be replaced by the culture of the printed book, which would bring new opportunities in the spread of the scriptural word. The increasing availability of the Bible during our period was, however, as much a function of linguistic diversification as of technical innovation. It had always been 'vernacular', for Hebrew (with Aramaic), Greek and Latin were simply the dominant languages of communication in the communities in which the scriptures were first used; now, wherever Christianity took root, new versions appeared for new linguistic groups. Most of the languages of the modern Christian world that are distinguishable by the end of the medieval period had found their literary feet, and often their alphabetical form, through the activities of Christian missionaries and monks. Reservations about direct public access to scripture were expressed perennially, but – with the notable exception of the activities of the Inquisition – wholehearted official opposition was rare, or at least ineffective.

Learning for the medieval Christian was, essentially, the study of the Bible, whose language and content permeated thought. In both East and West, church writers continually sought a balance between literal and spiritual interpretation. Learning had found its natural home in the monastery for hundreds of years but increasingly in the West it began to move out, first to the great cathedral schools, and then to the newly formed universities, involving a fundamental change of approach to interpretation. For the cloistered monk, steeped in the tradition of *lectio divina*, the Bible was still a *bibliotheca*, to be experienced as a whole, an ineffable synthesis of its many parts. In the schools, however, and above all in the universities, it became an object of analytical study. The discipline of theology evolved, and its raw material, the text itself, was now an object of keen critical attention. With the end of what had been in effect a Benedictine monopoly of professional religion, new and often aggressive orders reflected and exploited new social structures.

While continual change and often confusing variety in the transmission of the Bible are fundamental themes in our history, we are repeatedly reminded that the Christian world of the Middle Ages (itself in two parts) existed in a sort of dynamic equilibrium with the worlds of the other great monotheistic religions, the older Judaism and the younger Islam. Politically and socially, civilisations might clash, but in the scriptural sphere such interaction was often a matter of creative competition and fruitful exchange. Thus the idea of using the codex for Hebrew scripture may have come from the example of the

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Qurʾān; Jewish exegesis in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was profoundly affected by the exegesis of the Christian schools; and Islamic writers needed a knowledge of the Bible in order to explain how Muḥammad came to succeed Christ. The chapters in this volume reveal many more examples.

Although the period covered by our survey is notionally 600 to 1450, such boundaries are flexible. Much of what our authors describe cannot be understood without detailed reference to what went before, and it may also be necessary to take the story forward to complete a coherent picture. Even today, the study of many areas of Bible history is in its infancy and our chapters reflect much recent and continuing scholarship, most obviously in the field of textual history, where (to give but one obvious example) research on the material of the Cairo Genizah continues. The volume is organised in five sections which highlight some main themes, though neither the sections nor the chapters within them are intended to be (or could be) exclusive. ‘Text and version’ are closely connected with ‘format and transmission’, and these in turn may affect, or themselves be a reflection of, ‘interpretation’; exploration of the ‘use’ of the Bible is potentially limitless, for it includes all aspects of lived Christianity, and the concept of ‘transformations’ embraces the hugely diverse efforts of those whom we might call the creative artists of biblical interpretation: for them, at least, the Bible remained a *bibliotheca* to be experienced.

## Texts and versions

The texts of scripture in the primary languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, underwent significant developments during our period, and versions in ‘new’ languages multiplied. The relationships between the three older languages are well known; the new versions derive mostly from Greek or Latin, though there is sometimes a return to the Hebrew, too. There is a web of further interactions between languages, new and old: Armenian mediates between Greek and Georgian, for instance; early Slavonic translations may have been influenced by versions in Old High German; and there is a three-way relationship between French (Occitan), Spanish (Catalan) and Italian translations.

As for the Hebrew Bible, the text that we use today is a product of our period (Chapter 1). The adoption by Jews of the codex form facilitated the development of the Masorah, the compendious critical apparatus which, especially in respect of the vovelling and thus ‘fixing’ of the bare consonantal text, brought relative textual stability and stimulated the development of Hebrew grammar and lexicography. Innovation and ‘technical’ revolution also affected

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the transmission of the Greek of both Testaments (Chapter 2). Notable early on was the adoption of the pandect, along with the move from majuscule to minuscule scripts, but it was accompanied by a bewildering variety of part-Bible formats; idiosyncrasy was a defining feature of the Byzantine biblical manuscript. The complex relationship of the Old Testament texts to the Septuagint led to much textual variation, but there was hardly less for the Greek of the New Testament. Greek was also the language of the Byzantine Jews, and the idea that they rejected Hellenic culture once Christians had adopted it is not tenable (Chapter 3). There is abundant evidence to show that Greek-speaking Jews in the Middle Ages had their own translations, transmitted orally or in written form, which, derived as they were from revisions of the Septuagint made by Jews in the Roman period, were different from those current in the Christian church.

Despite the daunting complexities that dog the study of the transmission of the Latin Bible in respect of its text (or more correctly texts), the outline is clear. The earlier part of our period, until about 900, saw the consolidation of the 'new' versions of Jerome (Chapter 4). These, with the implicit endorsement of church writers such as Gregory the Great and Isidore, were privileged over the Old Latin versions; Jerome's authority extended also to the books that he did not revise, which were joined with the others to form what later came to be known as the Vulgate. But uniformity was a long way off: textual variation and local traditions remained, as did Old Latin contamination; the constitution of the canon was fluid and the permutations of book order apparently limitless. After 900, the sense of textual disorder seemed to increase, but detailed modern scholarship was still wanting (Chapter 5). Efforts to counter a relentless process of deterioration were made, but they tended to be local, with little long-term effect. The influence of the schoolmen was considerable, but there was no officially approved text; it took another two centuries for steps to be taken (at Trent) to produce one – and fifty more years for that text actually to appear. One important effect of the thirteenth-century Parisian Bibles, however, was to establish many of the ancillary features of Bibles which would soon become commonplace.

Among the older vernaculars of the East, Ethiopic (or Ge'ez) was one of the earliest to have the Bible, probably by the middle of the fourth century; the Old Testament was probably translated from the Greek Septuagint used in Alexandria, possibly by Jewish Christians (Chapter 6). Bible translation is of unusual importance in Ethiopian history and is invaluable for understanding the transmission of Judaism, Islam and traditional African religions. Crucially, too, Ethiopic preserves intact many ancient writings that have been lost in

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the original languages, including the book of Enoch and the book of Jubilees. After the rise of Islam and the Arab conquests, the pastoral and liturgical needs of Christian communities where Arabic now dominated made a Bible in that language an obvious necessity (Chapter 7). The earliest translations were made in the Palestinian monastic milieu, the sources being Greek, Syriac and Coptic. The heyday of translation was the ninth century (though there was no complete Arabic Bible until the sixteenth), and at about the same time appeared the first Arabic translations of the Hebrew Bible by Jews.

The Bible in Armenian had a complex gestation period, paradigmatic of Armenia's role in the spread of Christianity through southern Caucasia (Chapter 8). After beginnings in oral tradition and the creation of an alphabet specifically for Christian purposes, it developed first through translations from Greek and Syriac prototypes, coloured by Antiochene exegesis. A major mid-fifth-century revision eschewed earlier freedoms in favour of a more literal translation, made to a new Greek standard, but both textual streams continued to circulate, with manuscripts frequently showing cross-contamination. In Georgian, the earliest fragments of gospels date from the sixth century, but there are indications of earlier translation; at least some of the Old Testament, too, had been translated by the sixth century (Chapter 9). There is evidence of multiple recensions for most parts of the Bible. The base text for the Gospels may have been Old Armenian, while Syro-Armenian and Greek influences were at work variously in the Old Testament. A later phase of the evolution of Georgian scripture depended on the activities of Georgian scholars outside Georgia, most notably at Mt Athos.

The Bible was brought to the Slavs in two more or less simultaneous but largely independent movements (Chapter 10). The first extensive translations into Slavonic were probably those made by the Byzantine missionaries, the brothers Cyril and Methodius, in the second half of the ninth century, but the 'golden age' of the Slavonic Bible followed the virtual obliteration of that legacy in the tenth century by Magyar invasion – it ended with further invasion, by the Ottomans in the fourteenth century – and was centred on the monasteries of Bulgaria and Macedonia, along with Bulgarian foundations on Mt Athos. A second movement was based among the Bohemians, who were evangelised by the Franks, using Latin, in the ninth century. Czech vernacular translations begin in the thirteenth century but the full flowering of Slavic scripture, and the first full Bible translation based on the Latin Vulgate, came a century later, under the aegis of the emperor Charles IV.

Behind the façade of Latin unity in western Christendom scripture in the local vernaculars thrived from the seventh century onwards, all of it rendered

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from Latin and thus contrasting with that notable example from an earlier era, the Bible in Gothic (an east Germanic language soon to disappear), whose sources for both Testaments were Greek. Christianity came to the continental Germanic peoples as early as the end of the fifth century and the conversions were completed by Charlemagne in 804. Almost from the start scriptural translations of some sort were available to them in their various Low and High German dialects (Chapter 11); among the earliest extant evidence are eighth-century scraps in Old Frisian. An easy interchange across dialectal areas created a sort of 'linguistic ecumene' of vernacular scriptural texts reaching to all parts, helped by Charlemagne's encouragement of vernacular Germanic culture. In England, too, parts of scripture were continuously available in English, in one form or another, from at least the eighth century (Chapter 12). An engagement with the polemics and potential problems of scriptural translation was evident, too, at least as early as Alfred the Great in the ninth century. Like so many vernaculars, English initially saw a mass of paraphrastic renderings of key biblical narratives in verse, along with considerable English glossing of the Latin texts, but as early as the turn of the tenth century continuous unadorned translations of the Gospels and much of the Hexateuch were made. After an explosion of English biblical versions of all genres from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, much of it cloaked by interpretative guidance derived from the schoolmen, the Wycliffite Bible consciously attempted something different: the naked word (more or less).

Although there were missions to Scandinavian countries in the ninth century, Christianity was not established firmly throughout until the twelfth (Chapter 13). Small amounts of scripture used in homilies or the liturgy survive from this period, but substantial translations were apparently compiled only in the fourteenth century or later. By this time the Norse language originally common to all the Scandinavian countries had developed into separate languages. The Norwegian translations are characterised by much paraphrase and the addition of commentary based on sources such as Peter Comestor. Some of the Swedish translations may well have originated in the Birgittine order of nuns and this is a possibility for the Danish Bible as well. The absence of extant Scandinavian translations of the Gospels may be the result of loss, but the greater attraction of the Old Testament historical narratives to people steeped in the saga tradition would be no surprise.

The emergence of scripture in French may be understood in terms of a process whereby the vernacular came to compete with Latin as a high-status language in support of the devotional needs of the laity (Chapter 14). From the tenth century, two main language communities within 'France' can be

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distinguished: north of the Loire, the *langue d'oïl* (Old French proper) and, south of the Loire, the *langue d'oc* (Occitan). After a range of works in which translation went hand in hand with interpretation (creating one important new genre, the Bible history), the first complete vernacular Bible in Europe appeared in the mid-1200s – the Old French Bible, which survives in multiple copies. Occitan scripture was always less in volume, but it largely echoed the north in its range of genres and often depended on Old French sources, though it was also in touch with the scripture of its Italian and Catalan neighbours.

Systematic research on the numerous surviving manuscripts of the Bible in Italian has begun only recently (Chapter 15). The fourteenth century was especially productive, with most earlier evidence coming from Tuscany. Biblical manuscripts were not the preserve of the religious confraternities but were increasingly owned by wealthy families for use in their private devotions. Complete Bibles appeared in substantial numbers from the fifteenth century, but there was a strong tradition also of Bible histories, many of them in verse. By the sixteenth century, translations were made in Judaeo-Italian circles directly from the Hebrew. The notably free circulation of scripture in Italian during the medieval period ended with the coming of the Inquisition. Richness and diversity were the hallmarks of vernacular scripture in the Iberian peninsular also (Chapter 16). Two main language groups may be distinguished – the Castilian and the Catalan. The Jewish role in the formation of the former was crucial, for the Jews needed a vernacular Bible to help them understand the Hebrew Bible. Their activities account for the biggest group of surviving manuscripts. After their suppression, Bibles became a key element in the efforts of the secret Jews to retain their faith. The Catalan manuscripts that survive are mostly those that were dispersed beyond Spain and so escaped the actions of the Inquisition. A few early fragments show Occitan origins. The major 'Fourteenth-Century Bible', probably a royal commission, was based on the Vulgate but Hebrew influence is apparent in some books; the succeeding 'Fifteenth-Century Bible' was stopped by the Inquisition.

## Format and transmission

Until the very end of our period, all transmission of the Bible was by manuscript – with the exception of the scrolls still used in Hebrew in liturgical contexts – but the range of formats and specific contents was almost limitless. Selection of books, size of volume, choice of text, use of ancillary features (if any), the provision of illustration (if any), the quality of presentation – all varied

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according to need and purpose and, in many cases, the wealth of the sponsor; political and doctrinal considerations may also have entered the equation.

In the East the Greek text of the Old Testament was not standardised and Byzantine scribes had to try to reconcile disagreements between their exemplars (Chapter 17). For the New Testament, however, we can recognise a koine version whose homogeneity increased with time – first seen in a group of luxury codices of 550–600, it was used in the mass of manuscripts from the ninth to the fifteenth century. Manuscripts in the Byzantine world (in whatever language) were mostly produced by professional scribes associated with the state bureaucracy or church, in small workshops not tied to large institutionalised centres. The process was thus more or less immune to political upheavals and continued into the thirteenth century, even under Muslim rule. Part-Bibles remained usual, but there was no stable combination of books; pandects were known but were exceptional.

The Carolingian period saw an explosion in the copying of biblical manuscripts, and above all of pandects – most famously the fine presentation copies characteristic of Tours but also the more portable scholarly volumes from Fleury (Chapter 18). There were multi-volume Bibles, too, and a wide range of part-Bibles, dominated by the gospelbook. Charlemagne's faith in the Bible as the perfect source of instruction and wisdom contributed to a renewed preoccupation with textual matters; Alcuin's careful correction of the text and Theodulf's text-critical approach were responses. In the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, Bible production entered one of its most distinctive phases, reflecting the rise in western Europe of a passion for the art and architecture of ancient Rome (Chapter 19). Hundreds of 'Romanesque' Bibles were made, which, at their most impressive, could be as much as 900 mm in height and were often luxury volumes, richly illuminated and decorated, each being conceived as an individual work. Sponsored by popes, bishops and, often, the aristocratic laity, and apparently designed for an honoured place on the altar, these manuscripts bore witness to the effectiveness of the revitalisation of the institutions of the church and the commitment to communal worship in the wake of Gregorian reform.

The work we now associate above all with the medieval scholastic world, widely known simply as the 'Gloss', began on a small scale among a group of northern French scholars in the early twelfth century, in the form of short marginal explanations of the biblical text, but it was soon being mass-produced all over Europe. The full version required at least twenty volumes (Chapter 20). It seemed to meet the needs of the time, suiting the teaching style used in the schools (especially in Paris), which was based on the oral exposition



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of an authoritative text. Yet it was a surprisingly short-lived phenomenon and by the 1230s had already outlived its usefulness, partly because it had become too difficult to understand for those not already deeply versed in the church fathers.

The dominance of pandects, the introduction of smaller – and thus more portable – formats for these (made possible by various technical innovations) and the sheer numbers of Bibles copied made the thirteenth century one of the most significant periods in the transmission of the Latin Bible (Chapter 21). Although these developments were famously centred on the Paris of the schools and university, the concept of the so-called ‘Paris Bible’ must be understood to imply not a specific format (for that varied hugely), but one current textual type. While this was never in any sense an official text, Paris Bibles did exert a significant influence on later developments, including early printed Bibles and, eventually, the Sixto-Clementine text.

The four Gospels were among the most copied Christian texts in the Middle Ages and survive in many forms, ranging from large and sumptuous gospelbooks (often commissioned by wealthy patrons, both secular and religious) to practical ‘pocket’ versions (Chapter 22). They varied widely, too, in the prologues and other ancillary material they carried. The canon tables of Eusebius were popular and often attracted elaborate decoration. The gospelbooks that survive are dominated by the sumptuous volumes, for they were the ones treasured and protected, but they would originally have been far outnumbered by workaday copies. The Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation) also stood out among the books of the New Testament for special treatment, on account of its eschatological significance as an essential final statement of holy scripture as prophecy (Chapter 23). Unlike their successors in the Reformation, most medieval Christians accepted a literal meaning for the book, which for them had a unique divine authority, and so it circulated from early times as a separate book, often accompanied by commentary reflecting contemporary ecclesiological or moral issues. From the twelfth century onwards, the Apocalypse was translated into many European vernaculars and these manuscripts are as numerically important as the Latin ones.

In the form of a discrete psalter, Psalms was probably more widely used than any other biblical book (Chapter 24). Among the three Latin versions of Psalms apparently made by Jerome, the dominance of the *Romanum* was assured until about 800 by the spread of Benedictine monasticism, but thereafter the *Gallicanum* became the most widespread, especially after being chosen by Alcuin; the *Hebraicum*, though it is Jerome’s most accurate rendering, never enjoyed more than occasional local acceptance. The recitation of psalms was

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integral to the performance of liturgy from earliest Christian times, so that they became part of the daily vocabulary of both monastic and secular religious and left a mark on the language and modes of expression of medieval writers. The psalter was, moreover, the earliest book to be made in any quantity for the laity.

From the beginning, Christianity (in contrast to both Judaism and Islam) was a religion of the image as well as the book, and in a wide range of Bibles and part-Bibles illustrations gave visual form to the biblical themes, helping to structure the sacred text and provide additional reward for the thoughtful observer (Chapter 25). Although the earliest surviving example of an illustrated biblical manuscript is from the East (a sixth-century Syriac Bible), such volumes were rarer there, even after the end of the Iconoclast period. In the West, lavish examples appeared in the Carolingian period but it is between 1050 and 1225 that we see an explosion of large-format illustrated Bibles throughout Christian Europe. Among part-Bibles, it is the gospelbooks, Apocalypses and psalters that accounted for most of the illustrated volumes. Vernacular Bibles attracted illustration, too: of special note was the *Bible moralisée*, which gave a pared-down biblical text with lavish illustration and was developed for French monarchs. In the later part of our period, illustrated Bibles were ever more closely associated with the wealthy laity.

### The Bible interpreted

In a cultural world that made little separation between religion and politics, interpretation of the Bible reflected institutional developments and broad intellectual, as well as theological, concerns and in turn itself acted to shape the culture. The overall trend was a move from the cloister to the school, and from the Bible as a focus for spiritual rumination to the Bible as a resource for study and teaching. The focus shifted from the Old Testament to the New, evident in a reaching back to the apostolic life, the ideal of which was embodied in the new orders of friars. Models of interpretation able to address the realities of human life were increasingly sought. Whatever the details, church writers in both East and West continually looked for a balance in their exegesis between literal and spiritual interpretation.

Byzantine exegesis, rooted in a creed-based orthodoxy relying on a select few authorities (in particular, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil and Theodoret), has largely been neglected or marginalised in relation to eye-catching developments in the West, but the lingering perception that nothing original was produced is false (Chapter 26). Byzantine exegesis after the sixth