

# Lecture One

## Telling the Story of a Book

**Scope:** The Bible is a powerful book even when it is not read. Regarded with fear and distrust by some, it is revered as the source of truth by many others throughout the world. Yet both responses often have little to do with the Bible's actual contents; they are directed to the Bible as a book that has exercised peculiar influence in world history. This opening lecture addresses the odd status of the Bible as a book that has transcended the limitations of normal literature, so that it can truly be said to have a story of its own, distinct from the many fine or frightening stories it happens to contain. This lecture also sketches the general approach, governing premises, and broad outline of the course.

### Outline

- I. The Bible is perhaps best known for the many stories it contains, stories that separately and together have had a major impact on Western culture.
  - A. Most known and loved are the vivid accounts drawn from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament that many have learned as children.
    1. The Hebrew Bible is filled with individual vignettes that evoke a world of passion and drama.
    2. In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as a speaker of parables that are impressive for their brevity and pointedness.
    3. The New Testament also contains highly colored accounts concerning Jesus and his followers.
    4. These individual stories constantly appear as moral lessons and as the subject of art.
  - B. In addition to such smaller vignettes, the Bible contains stories of an epic character.
    1. The account of Abraham and the other patriarchs is the saga of a people's ancestors.
    2. The story of Exodus and conquest is an epic foundation for a people's claim to a land and an identity.

3. The account of Jesus' death and resurrection forms the mythic basis for a new sort of religious identity.
  - C. It is even possible to speak of "the story of the Bible" as encompassing the entire sweep of narrative from Genesis to Revelation.
  - D. For many readers, the positive shaping accomplished by the Bible's stories is sometimes eclipsed by the negative impact of its "texts of terror," but it is difficult to deny the impact of the Bible's stories on the soul of the West.
- II.** The Bible considered as a book (or, more properly, collection of books = *ta biblia*) also has a story quite apart from its contents.
- A. The Bible is a publishing phenomenon, making it the "book among books."
    1. Since 1815, it has been printed an estimated 5 billion times, in some 2,100 languages.
    2. It is more reliably present in hotel rooms (the Gideon Bible) than the Yellow Pages.
    3. It is undoubtedly read—and misread—by more people around the globe than any other book.
  - B. The Bible as a book has an almost personified power that goes beyond the sum of its contents.
    1. The Bible speaks as an authority ("the Bible says") and provides surety for oaths.
    2. In houses of worship, the Bible occupies a special place, and in acts of worship, it is shown honor.
    3. It can even represent a mindset, as in "biblical religion," or "the Bible-belt," or "Bible-thumping."
- III.** Telling the story of the Bible as a book involves a number of complex considerations.
- A. Where does the story begin?
    1. It is not entirely clear when we can first speak of "the Bible" as a book.
    2. Both the obscure origins of the respective biblical compositions, as well as the process by which they adhere as a collection, require attention.

- B.** In what forms does the Bible appear?
    - 1. The story requires attention to the technology of book-making, both ancient and modern.
    - 2. There are decisive differences in what is meant by a “book” as compositions are first copied on scrolls, then in codices, and then are printed.
  - C.** How many Bibles are there, and how many stories are there to tell?
    - 1. There is an obvious difference between the collection of compositions that Jews and Christians call the Bible.
    - 2. Even among the three major groups of Christians, there are differences in the actual books included in the Bible.
    - 3. Both in ancient and modern times, the standard collection has been challenged from within 75 traditions.
  - D.** In how many languages (and cultural forms) does the Bible appear?
    - 1. For the Hebrew Bible, both the Hebrew and the early translations into Greek and Aramaic are significant.
    - 2. For the Christian Bible, the Greek version of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint, or LXX) is important, as are the original Greek of the New Testament and the many early versions (translations).
    - 3. For the Christian Bible in particular, translation into popular languages has been a key aspect of missionary activity.
  - E.** How does the interpretation of the Bible become part of its story?
    - 1. The Bible is interpreted from distinct religious perspectives in Judaism and Christianity.
    - 2. Modern historical interpretation stands in tension with both religious traditions.
    - 3. Interpretation happens in a variety of cultural forms beyond the literary.
- IV.** This course traces the story of the Bible(s) through four chronological stages, attempting at each stage to take into account all of the complexities already identified.
- A.** Stage one takes up the origins of the biblical compositions and the process by which they reached the form of a collection within Judaism and Christianity.

- B. Stage two considers the multiple versions of the Christian Bible in antiquity and the patterns of interpretation within Judaism and Christianity through the Middle Ages.
- C. Stage three takes up the multiple strands of the Bible's story as a consequence of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment.
- D. Stage four carries the story into modernity, with special attention to the development of historical criticism and contemporary responses to it.

**Essential Reading:**

J. B. Gabel and C. B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How does the organization of this course already lead to the perception of the Bible as a historical and literary phenomenon inextricable from the histories of peoples?
2. What are the implications of referring to both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as "the Bible"?