

## Lecture Twenty-Four

### The Bible's Story Continues

**Scope:** It is worth pondering the astonishing fact that the Bible—a book whose origins stretch back to earliest recorded history—continues in today's throwaway world to have so much presence and power, even after it has been subjected to the most critical scrutiny and the most sustained attack. It continues to be the world's greatest publishing success, with entire bookstores devoted to Bibles and the tools for reading it. It continues not only to be read by millions around the globe but to be read passionately. It continues to fascinate even those whom it repels. In an age of media overkill, programs and films with biblical themes draw huge audiences. And books that challenge the truth of the biblical account (while still relying on that account) become huge bestsellers. Even when Christianity and Judaism sometimes seem to be on their last legs, their Bibles always seem to find new ones on which to stand.

### Outline

- I. It is appropriate at this stage (surely not the last) of the Bible's long story to consider its remarkable longevity.
  - A. The Bible was born, not all at once, but through centuries of human experience and the struggle to interpret reality in light of extraordinary claims.
  - B. The Bible has never been completely stable or totally without critics, even in periods when it has been most prized.
  - C. The Bible in the last four centuries has sustained more direct attacks on its truthfulness and worth than any other literature.
- II. The Bible has not merely survived, but it continues to exercise impressive power over human minds and hearts.
  - A. It is not only the world's bestselling book, but also the book most consistently and devotedly read around the world.
    1. The Bible continues to be read aloud every week in church and synagogue, followed by sermons or homilies explicating its meaning and applying its message to contemporary life.

2. The Bible is the focus of countless gatherings of Jewish and Christian faithful, who meet and study the text together, either in formal schools or in voluntary groups.
  3. Entire bookstores in many cities are devoted to providing materials to assist such study and devotional reading of the Bible.
  4. On high school and college campuses, students gather in voluntary groups to study the Bible.
  5. It is impossible to adequately measure the behavioral effect of such devotional reading, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is considerable.
- B.** In still another adaptation to a technological development, the Bible now exists in a variety of electronic formats.
1. Software exists to place the original languages, dozens of translations, and a multitude of interpretive tools at the fingertips of any interested person.
  2. People can “Google” into Bible blogs and participate in chat rooms through virtual presence.
  3. The effects of these new forms of experiencing the Bible are difficult to assess at such an early stage of development.
- C.** In a manner quite distinct from the devotional reading found in churches and synagogues, the academic study of the Bible is a flourishing and respectable field of intellectual inquiry.
1. A Ph.D. in Biblical Studies is offered by the world’s best universities and is recognized for its demanding character.
  2. The Society of Biblical Literature and other learned societies devoted to biblical studies count tens of thousands of members throughout the world.
  3. A distinct feature of contemporary biblical studies is its interdisciplinary character, engaging not only theology but also the entire range of humanistic and social-scientific fields in conversation.
  4. This remarkable phenomenon coexists with an increasingly anti-religious bias in many universities, an elite cultural bias against the “Bible Belt,” and even a vigorous rejection of the Bible’s symbols by Christian critics.
- D.** News or entertainment concerning the Bible can command cultural attention in a distinctive manner.

1. Plays or movies concerning the Bible invariably generate controversy and huge box-office profits.
2. The discovery of new codices is exploited by means of popular publications and sensational television documentaries and talk shows.
3. Advocates for *creation science* (based in the Bible) both seek and receive media coverage, while both conservative and liberal religious groups seek a way to “teach the Bible” in high school curricula.
4. For decades, the findings of the Jesus Seminar or other publications command a yearly ritualistic article in news magazines.

**III.** It is also worth asking the reasons for this book’s continuing influence in the face of severe and sustained criticism.

- A. The Bible’s influence is not simply the result of cultural inertia—other cultural relics don’t stir nearly the same passion.
- B. The Bible’s persistence does not derive from its accurate reportage of the empirical world—both science and history have removed the “biblical worldview” from the list of options acceptable to the educated person.
- C. The Bible’s power comes from its character as a religious text; its success in witnessing to and interpreting a way of life as deriving from and directed toward a God who creates, sustains, saves, and sanctifies humans; and its ability to imagine a world that provides an alternative to those imagined by science and history and that invites humans to make that world empirical by the manner in which they live their lives.

**IV.** Whatever the vicissitudes of popular culture, the future of the Bible’s story is most bound up with its role within communities of faith.

- A. In Judaism, despite centuries of repression and the shock of the Holocaust, Torah still speaks convincingly and powerfully about the way humans can honor God through the practices of justice and mercy.
- B. In Christianity, the Bible witnesses to God’s work in Jesus and the meaning of a life shaped by his ministry, death, and resurrection, through a transformation to the pattern of obedience and love he revealed.

- C. The Bible will continue to flourish as religious literature that gives meaning to and itself draws meaning from the ongoing experience of God in human lives.

**Essential Reading:**

G. Beckerlegge, ed., *Religion Today: Tradition, Modernity and Change: From Sacred Text to Internet*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

L. T. Johnson, “Imagining the World That the Bible Imagines,” in *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, with William S. Kurz, pp. 119–142.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Discuss the continuing cultural influence of the Bible in a time when the world seems to run on completely secular principles.
2. Is the desire to place the study of the Bible and its influence in the curriculum of American high schools a sign of its continuing cultural influence or its decline?