

GREATEST BOOK

THE STORY
OF HOW THE BIBLE
CAME TO BE

LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN & JERRY PATTENGALE

GENERAL EDITORS





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LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN, PH.D. & JERRY PATTENGALE, PH.D.

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with LEN WOODS



A Tyndale nonfiction imprint



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The World's Greatest Book: The Story of How the Bible Came To Be

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Previously published in 2017 as *World's Greatest Book: The Story of How the Bible Came To Be* by Worthy Books under ISBN 978-1945470011. First printing by Tyndale House Publishers in 2023.

Cover designed by Marc Whitaker / MTWdesign.net

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For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in China.

29 28 27 26 25 24 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PREFACE

The story you are about to read has many twists and turns, heroes and heroines, and exciting episodes of confrontation and intrigue. Throughout, our story is propelled by generations of devoted scholars who have worked to transmit the "world's greatest book" throughout the generations from antiquity to modern times.

What makes this story more engaging is that it is based on historical sources—all true to the best of our knowledge. We would neither have dedicated our time and effort to this project, nor agreed to the book's title, if we did not agree that the story told here is of enormous importance to our culture and civilization.

We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed working on it. It is the second book we have produced together—the coming together of a Jewish scholar who practices his faith, and a Christian scholar who does the same, both of whom are dedicated to the highest standards of academic scholarship. We both have worked for religious and nonreligious organizations, both internationally and locally, and have spent considerable time in Israel as well. While we recognize that we have differences regarding some key matters, we also appreciate our important commonalities

and our agreement regarding the role that the Bible (whether the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Bible) has played in the past and that it can continue to play in the future.

We also thank our colleague, Len Woods, who helped merge our thoughts and words. We began planning this book in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, after which Len drafted a manuscript. Through the following months of exchanges, we revised and discussed hundreds of topics and historical pivots until we arrived at this text. We were informed that the first edition of this book was easily the bestseller among the many books associated with the Museum of the Bible. This indeed is a tribute to the subject matter, the continued work of Len, and various experts who weighed in after the publication of the first edition.

—Lawrence H. Schiffman and Jerry A. Pattengale

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE BIBLE?

The book to read is not the one which thinks for you, but the one which makes you think.

No book in the world equals the Bible for that.

—HARPER LEE, AUTHOR, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

With a light rain falling on Manhattan's Upper East Side and a windchill near freezing, it was hardly an ideal night for an auction.

Yet none of that mattered to the eager buyers who crowded into Sotheby's, New York, on November 26, 2013. The sought-after prize? One of two copies of *The Bay Psalm Book* owned by the Old South Church in Boston. In 1640, this collection of biblical psalms had been translated from Hebrew and then typeset and printed by Puritan settlers. It was the first book published in British North America, just twenty years after the landing of the *Mayflower*.

Of the 1,700 copies originally printed, only eleven are known to survive.

Just two and a half minutes after an opening bid of \$6 million, frenzied buyers were offering more than \$12 million for this rare piece of religious history! The final purchase price was \$14.165 million, earning *The Bay Psalm Book* the new world record for the most expensive printed book ever sold at auction.

Mind-boggling, isn't it? And yet—antiquities experts are quick to point out—if you think *that's* pricey, consider the Gutenberg Bible. One leaf (a single sheet, made up of two pages) from a Gutenberg Bible can sell for as much as \$100,000. This is because the Gutenberg Bible is the first major book ever printed using movable type. What's more, it predates *The Bay Psalm Book* by more than 180 years! Of the forty-eight copies of the Gutenberg Bible that remain, only thirty-one are said to be in excellent condition. In the summer of 2015, eight leaves (including the Old Testament book of Esther) were auctioned at Sotheby's for just under \$1 million. Experts estimate that if an entire Gutenberg Bible ever came up for auction, it would likely fetch upward of \$50 million!

These are not isolated instances. In May 2014, at Christie's in Paris, an Italian Torah scroll (the first five books of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles) sold for a record \$3.87 million.

In early December 2016, the extensive private Bible collection of the late Dr. Charles Ryrie, a biblical scholar and longtime professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, sold at Sotheby's for \$7.34 million. His Wycliffe Bible alone brought in \$1.4 million.

Why do people attach such immense value to a bunch of old religious writings?

To be fair, not everyone does.

If you could time-travel back to Berlin, Germany, on the afternoon of November 9, 1938, you would arrive just in time for *Kristall-nacht*, the infamous "Night of Broken Glass."

This is the night the violence of the Holocaust was unleashed. A firestorm of racist rage—encouraged by Nazi government officials—broke out against Jews living throughout the German Reich. When the smoke cleared, ninety-one Jews were dead, hundreds more were injured, thousands of Jewish businesses and homes had been vandalized, and some 250 synagogues lay in smoldering ruins. In the days to come, Jewish men would be rounded up by the tens of thousands, put on trains, and shipped off to concentration camps.

Unreported in most history books is how much anger on *Kristallnacht* was also directed against the Hebrew Bible. In many cases, before setting a synagogue ablaze, mobs first removed its Torah scrolls. They piled these scrolls in nearby streets or parks and ceremoniously burned them while onlookers cackled, clapped, and danced around the flames. In some places, Nazi officials made rabbis incinerate their Torah scrolls before forcing them to read aloud from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

In other cities, the revered Hebrew writings weren't burned; they were ripped apart. In Vienna, Austria, Torah scraps were tied

to the backs of terrified Jews, who were then chased down city streets. One witness reported seeing German children marching gleefully atop a pile of shredded Torahs.

The carnage on this night was creative in its cruelty. In Fritzlar, Germany, the synagogue's sacred scrolls were taken to Nikolaus Street and unrolled so that a group of Hitler Youth could ride their bicycles over them. In Bavarian Lichtenfeld, when a Jewish woman tried to halt the desecration of sacred writings, she was accosted by several children. Following a brief struggle, the woman was dead. Children took the synagogue's prayer books and used them to play an impromptu game of football.¹

Throughout much of recorded history, one can find fierce antagonism toward the Bible. Around 600 BCE, the irate King Jehoiakim of Judah cut and burned a sacred scroll from the Jewish prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36). In 303 CE, the Roman emperor Diocletian issued an edict calling for the eradication of all Christian writings throughout the Roman Empire. More recently, ISIS extremists in Mosul, Iraq, have been videotaped burning piles of Bibles

It seems the adage is true: one man's trash is another man's treasure.

And vice versa.

When it comes to the Bible, everyone has an opinion. America's sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, gushed that the Bible was

"the best gift God has given to man" and that "all the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this Book."²

Compare Lincoln's warm sentiments to the decidedly colder view of Celsus, a philosopher of Platonism in the second century. He called the Jewish and Christian Bibles "altogether absurd." Seventeen centuries later, American novelist Mark Twain wrote that the Bible contains "some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies." More recently, British actor Ian McKellen said on the *Today* show, "I've often thought the Bible should have a disclaimer in the front saying, 'This is fiction." 5

Surely a book this discussed and disputed, this revered and reviled is worth a closer look.

This is a book about one of the world's most loved and loathed books. Given that, we should probably begin with some definitions and distinctions—and at least a few disclaimers.

What do we mean when we speak of the *Bible*? Our English word comes from the ancient Greek word *biblion* (plural, *biblia*), which means "scroll" or "book." It is related to the Greek word *biblos*, the name given to Egyptian papyrus shipped from the Phoenician port city of Byblos to Greece.

Over time, ancient Jews and early Christians began to use the word *biblia*, or Bible, to refer to a specific collection of writings that they deemed sacred. Common synonyms for the Bible include Scripture, Holy Writ, the Word of God, and the Good Book.

The Bible is one book made up of many smaller books. Jerome, a fourth-century scholar best known for translating the Bible into Latin, called the Bible "the Divine Library." What are the books that make up this "Divine Library"? The answer to that question depends on whom you ask.

The *Hebrew Bible* contains twenty-four books, divided into three categories: the five books of Moses, known also by the Hebrew term *Torah*; the eight books of the Prophets, also known as the *Nevi'im*; and the eleven books of the Writings, also known as the *Ketuvim*. All together, these books are referred to as the *Tanakh* (an acronym formed from the first letters—T, N, K—of those section titles).

The three divisions of the Hebrew Bible are arranged roughly chronologically. The Torah was canonized first, and it appears as a unified corpus in the Hebrew Bible. The Prophets were collected next, brought to a close after the last of the prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Earlier nonprophetic works, such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, as well as works completed after the prophets, were collected in the Writings.

The *Protestant Bible* contains all twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible. However, it counts some of the longer books that both Jews and Christians divide into two parts as separate books, for a total of

thirty-nine books, and arranges them in a different order. Instead of referring to these books as the Tanakh, Christians call them the *Old Testament*.

The word *testament* means "covenant" or "agreement." A last will and testament, for example, is a legally binding agreement specifying the distribution of one's property and possessions. Like Jews, Christians see the books of the Hebrew Bible as the story of how the agreement God made with the Jewish patriarch Abraham unfolded through the time of Moses, the kings, and the prophets.

To this collection of books, all written before the Common Era, Christians add twenty-seven more books, written during the midto-late first century CE. Christians call these books the *New Testament*, believing that they signal a new era in how God relates to Jews and non-Jews.

Christians see the Gospels (the first four books of the New Testament) as reliable accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Because of his recorded words and works, Christians believe Jesus to be the *Messiah* (the mighty deliverer/king) promised by the Old Testament prophets. They see the book of Acts as the story of the birth and growth of the church, the Epistles (letters) as instructions for the people of God, and the book of Revelation as a prophecy about the end of this present age. Thus, the Hebrew Bible has only twenty-four books, while the Protestant Bible contains sixty-six.

What about the *Catholic Bible* and the *Eastern Orthodox Bible*? Here, things get a bit trickier. These groups recognize the sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible, but they also include several additional books and extra passages that emerged from Jewish authors during the Second Temple period, often termed the "intertestamental era" by Christians (roughly 400 BCE to 1 CE).

While some Christians regard these extra writings (also called *deuterocanonical* or *apocryphal* writings) as sacred and inspired, others see them as merely useful or worth reading. Traditional Judaism forbade the reading of apocryphal texts, although occasional quotations of such texts appeared in rabbinic literature. However, modern times have seen an awakening of scholarly and popular interest in these works. In a later chapter, we will examine the criteria used by various religious bodies to determine whether a writing deserved to be called Scripture.

When all the book counting is complete, we are left with this: the Hebrew Bible recognizes twenty-four biblical books, the Protestant Bible sixty-six, the Catholic Bible seventy-three, and the Eastern Orthodox Bible eighty.

Many people are surprised to discover that reading the Bible is not at all like reading a self-help book or novel. From book to book (and sometimes even within a single book), the Bible shifts gears and switches genres. Its writings are, frankly, a mash-up of material. Stories are interspersed with teachings. In one place,

you encounter detailed instructions about religious rituals. In another place, you find heart-stopping action. The Bible—with its quirky amalgamation of poetry, proverbs, parables, and prophetic literature, its public sermons and private correspondence, its genealogies and census records—is less like a modern book and more like an ancient scrapbook of Jewish and Christian history and beliefs.

So why would we call the Bible "the world's greatest book"? The Bible is controversial. Many passages are not easy to read or understand. And then there is the awful truth that terrible things—slavery and the subjugation of women, for example—have been justified throughout history by people citing the Bible!

It's a fair question. And there's no getting around it: horrible abuses have been perpetrated through the centuries by people claiming biblical support. But consider some other realities.

The Bible Has Been a Catalyst for Positive Social Change.

Throughout recorded history, the teaching of Scripture has inspired humanitarian efforts. There's no way to know how many hospitals and schools have been built or how many charitable nonprofits and food banks have been established because of the Bible's injunctions to care for strangers, orphans, and widows (Deuteronomy 24:17, 19) and to "love your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:18, echoed in Mark 12:31).

The same Bible that was used by some to justify slavery also prompted many in the abolitionist movement of the mid-1800s to denounce the practice and call for its end. Its teachings

undergirded the powerful work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—by profession a preacher of the Bible's message. Biblical references are woven throughout King's "I Have a Dream" speech, one of the most famous and influential in American history.

The Bible Has a One-of-a-Kind History.

The Bible was penned by dozens of writers in three continents over a span of ten to fifteen centuries. That's admittedly unique. What other book has such a diverse background?

The Bible Possesses an Enduring Nature.

Throughout history there have been repeated attempts to discredit or destroy these writings considered to be sacred, but the Bible has survived each one. Countless people have perished in their efforts to defend and distribute the Bible.

The Bible Has Shaped Three World Religions.

Jews traditionally have accepted the books that comprise the Hebrew Bible. Christians have embraced both the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) and New Testament. Muslims have adapted many of the stories and people from the Bible and included them in the Qur'an, though with changes from the earlier texts and with claims that Jews and Christians falsified aspects of the Bible. (It should be noted that centuries of careful textual study by thousands of scholars, comparing the earliest biblical texts with those of the seventh- and eighth-century Muslim assertions, do not support such claims.) All said, the Hebrew Bible became the important

foundational document for the Jews and, together with the New Testament, for the Christians. Several centuries later, both volumes became influential for the Muslims, though second to the Qur'an and through a distinctly Muslim lens.

The Bible Has Had a Monumental Influence on Western Culture. Consider some of the many ways that the Bible has influenced our culture and, indeed, all of Western civilization.

The Bible has been foundational in education.

Many of the world's oldest and most prestigious colleges and universities—such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale—began as schools for training students in how to teach and preach the Bible. (Harvard and Yale were founded by the Puritans, the same group that published *The Bay Psalm Book.*)

The Bible permeates the halls of American government.

Bible verses are engraved or referenced on many public buildings—including the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials—across Washington, DC. The cornerstone of the Washington Monument has a Bible deposited in it. A marble relief portrait of Moses, the great lawgiver of Israel, looks down on the House chamber in the US Capitol. The Library of Congress showcases a Gutenberg Bible in a prominent and permanent display, and several Bible verses (Psalm 19:1; Proverbs 4:7; Micah 6:8; John 1:5) are etched into its walls. Historians tell us that Psalm 35 was read at the first Continental Congress in 1774. And guess what? All these years later,

the Bible is *still* prominent in the American political process. The morning after the 2016 US presidential election, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton quoted Galatians 6:9 in her concession speech. When Clinton's running mate, Tim Kaine, added a few words of appreciation, he alluded to a parable told by Jesus in Matthew 20:1–6 about workers laboring in a vineyard. A few weeks later, in his inauguration speech, America's forty-fifth president, Donald Trump, paraphrased Psalm 133:1.

The Bible has influenced the arts and entertainment.

Many of the world's most famous and exquisite works of art—such as Leonardo's *The Last Supper* and Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" fresco and *David* sculpture—feature scriptural themes. Some of Hollywood's biggest blockbusters—*The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *The Passion of the Christ*—have strong biblical storylines.

The Bible has altered our language.

Many biblical phrases have become part of our everyday vernacular, such as *an eye for an eye, a thorn in the flesh, there's nothing new under the sun*, and *go the extra mile*. Thanks to the wildly popular King James Bible, we use hundreds of such phrases almost every day. Most people have no clue when they use these common idioms that they are quoting Scripture! Though our culture may not be Biblecentered, it is most certainly Bible-saturated. Even the avowed skeptic H. L. Mencken admitted about the King James Bible, "It is probably the most beautiful piece of writing in all the literature of the world."

The Bible is history's best-selling book.

More than six billion copies of the Bible have been printed. Every year, an estimated 100 million copies of Scripture are sold—with no telling how many more copies are given away. One could counter that numbers alone aren't a reliable measure of greatness. After all, certain fast-food chains have sold billions of burgers, pizzas, and tacos . . . and no one is arguing that the lofty sales figures suggest these establishments are serving up gourmet fare. But though it's true that *quantity* by itself doesn't prove anything, clearly some *quality* of the Bible has motivated the making and acquiring of an incredible number of copies of it.

Before we get into our discussion of the Bible in the following chapters, a few disclaimers are in order.

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, so each time we cite a biblical statement in English, we are quoting a *translation* of the Bible. There are many good translations, each one attempting to render the original words of Scripture in an accurate, clear manner. In this book, we have decided to quote primarily from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

However, on occasion you will come across references like this: (Exodus 25:3, NJPS). That's a reference to a translation other than the NRSV—in this case, the new (1985) translation of the Hebrew Bible from the Jewish Publication Society. The numbers in each reference function as an address. In this case, they are telling

you to look at chapter 25 of the book of Exodus, specifically the third verse. The Bible's chapter divisions were added in the thirteenth century. Verse numbers were added later—to the Hebrew Bible around 1448 and the New Testament around 1551—to help readers navigate the text.

Since the Bible is a book about God, we will be mentioning God in this book. In doing so, we will follow the traditional custom of using masculine pronouns—he, his, him—to refer to Deity. We do this not because we think God is male (several biblical passages ascribe feminine qualities to God, such as Isaiah 49:15, 66:13, and Hosea 13:8). We do this because the ancient biblical texts do this.

Let's be clear at the outset: this is not a book about the *content* or *message* of the Bible. Our goal is not to discuss or dismiss theological beliefs. Rather, this is a peek into the fascinating history of the Bible. This is the story behind what some refer to as "the greatest story ever told." How in the world did we get this book that some people swear by—and other people swear at?

The World's Greatest Book is meant to be a book for everyone. It is for the faithless and the faithful. You don't have to be a believer to admit that the Bible has played a significant role in human civilization. You also don't have to be a skeptic to have a grocery list of questions about the formation of the Bible, such as:

- Who wrote these documents and when?
- How were these ancient writings transmitted through the ages?

- As scribes made copies of copies, didn't they make mistakes that caused the ancient writings to be changed and corrupted?
- How was it decided which writings would be included in the Bible?
- What are the Dead Sea Scrolls, and why are archaeological finds like these such a big deal?

In this book, we hope to provide satisfying answers to those questions. Mostly, however, our goal—whether you are an agnostic from Amsterdam, a Jew living in Jerusalem, or a Christian from Canada—is for you to know the long and winding background of how the Bible came to be. It is a fascinating story that includes a little bit of everything: adventure and violence, mystery and bravery, and dumb luck or divine intervention, depending on your point of view.

We think everyone should know the remarkable story of the Bible—that the Torah you read on your smartphone using a Bible app required the efforts of kings and scholars, committees and councils, and a host of hardworking scribes . . . and that the reason there is a Gideon Bible in the drawer next to your hotel bed is that countless people over thousands of years wrote, copied, hid, copied, protected, copied, collated, compared, corrected, and copied some more . . . then searched, researched, studied, translated, smuggled, printed, shipped, and—in many cases—suffered or even died for it.

We want you to know that the production team of the Bible included not only prominent religious leaders but also an unlikely

cast of offbeat characters. In these pages you will encounter, among others, an unsuspecting bedouin hunter, a couple of Scottish widows riding camels across North Africa, an astronaut, and a cheese merchant. Throw in a washing machine and a hunt for nutrient-rich soil, and we're pretty sure the story of how we got the Bible is a story you won't soon forget.

Issues of faith aside, veteran religion reporter Kenneth Briggs, formerly of the *New York Times*, was spot-on when he said, "The Bible is the springboard to opening all kinds of ideas, thoughts, beliefs about what our life is about."

Welcome to the fascinating story of how we got the world's greatest book.

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING

ENCOUNTER AT SINAI

The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Then the LORD spoke to Moses.

—EXODUS 19:20—21 NASB

In 1843 Dr. Constantin von Tischendorf, an instructor on leave from the University of Leipzig, grew weary of studying old texts in the musty libraries of Europe. So, he packed his bags and took off. This young German scholar with piercing eyes and a shock of dark, wavy hair had one goal: to discover and decipher the oldest surviving copies of Scripture. Tischendorf was obsessed, and he

was relentless. He spent thirteen months in Italy before making his way to Egypt. He was Indiana Jones minus the bullwhip (and plus a serious set of pork-chop sideburns).

In 1844, Tischendorf arrived at Saint Catherine's (or, as it is officially known, the Holy Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai), an ancient Eastern Orthodox monastery built at the base of the mountain traditionally claimed to be Sinai, in modernday Egypt. Perhaps while in Italy he had read of the experience of Vitaliano Donati, professor of botany and natural history at the University of Turin. Donati had himself visited Saint Catherine's in 1791.

As far as we know, Donati didn't make any significant botanical discoveries in the sands around Sinai. He did, however, spy a book that captured his attention. He wrote in his journal of having seen an old Bible at Saint Catherine's "comprising leaves of handsome, large, delicate, and square-shaped parchment, written in a round and handsome script."

It may have been this reference that prompted the not-yetthirty-year-old Tischendorf to cross the Mediterranean, trek hundreds of miles across the North African wilderness, and knock on the door of Saint Catherine's. At any rate, by coming to Sinai, he had come to the right place.

In a sense, the story of how the Bible came to be begins at Sinai. While the biblical stories start with creation, Adam and Eve, the Flood, and the patriarchs (early Hebrew leaders who followed God), the same text says it was Moses who recorded this narrative.

Many within the Judeo-Christian tradition have suspected that it may have been in this place, where Saint Catherine's Monastery now sits, that God first called to Moses from the midst of a burning bush (Exodus 3:1–6). As a matter of fact, if you ever have the privilege of visiting, the monks of Saint Catherine's will gladly show you a bush growing—but not burning—in their courtyard. They believe this is the actual bush referred to in Scripture!

Tradition says that Moses followed this divine call and made a beeline to Pharaoh's palace. There, equipped with a miracleworking staff, assisted by his brother Aaron, and enabled by the power of God, Moses liberated the people of Israel from many generations of slavery. Then he led them on a two-month journey back to Mount Sinai (which some traditionalists think was also called Mount Horeb). As the people camped at the base, Moses met with God on the summit (Exodus 19:1–2). According to the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament), after receiving God's law, Moses descended the mountain. There, the Bible teaches, in the rocky valley beneath Sinai, Moses read these divine decrees to the Jewish people. This is the place where the people of Israel entered into a covenant relationship with God.

We can't afford to miss this fact: it is while the Jewish people were at Sinai that we find the first biblical references to "the book of the covenant" (Exodus 24:7). In other words, it is in this remote desert place that, according to Judeo-Christian tradition, the laws, words, and what the Israelites believed to be the pronouncements

of God first began to be written down. Consider these verses from the book of Exodus—a passage that describes events that reportedly took place at Sinai:

- "Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord" (Exodus 24:4).
- "[Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (Exodus 24:7).
- "The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction" (Exodus 24:12).
- "When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18).

The belief of Judeo-Christian tradition is that the Bible, as we know it, began at Sinai. God spoke (and even wrote on stone tablets) certain words, and it is believed that Moses did a good bit of writing too (Exodus 24:4; 34:28–29). This revelation has been understood by both Judaism and Christianity to be the beginning of the composition of the five books of Moses (Torah). The exact nature of that process, however, has long been debated by religious thinkers and scholars.

If old biblical writings were what Dr. Tischendorf hoped to find, then stopping at Saint Catherine's was the best decision he ever made. The monastery was renowned even in the 1840s for its vast, valuable library. (Today it is regarded as the oldest continually functioning library in the world!)

We should note that Tischendorf did *not* unearth any broken stone tablets (as described in Exodus 32:19) at Saint Catherine's. However, the professor *did* make a startling and important discovery. According to his version of events (which monastery officials vigorously dispute), Tischendorf noticed some parchments in a waste bin near the monastery's furnace.

The scholar retrieved them and examined them closely. They were large, measuring about 15×13.5 inches. They had four columns of text on each side. They were handwritten in beautiful uncial (all capital letters) script.

Even in the dim light, Tischendorf could see that the parchments were part of a codex, an ancient manuscript formatted like a modern book. He realized they were from a very old Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament). In all, Tischendorf counted 129 leaves (pages) that seemed destined to serve as kindling!

According to Dr. Bruce Metzger, a noted Greek and New Testament scholar, one of the monks informed the horrified Tischendorf that two such baskets of "rubbish" had already been burned. Unable to conceal his concern, the visitor asked if he might have the stash of discarded parchments.

codex:

Perhaps only then perceiving their value, the monks' mood changed. They eventually agreed to let Tischendorf take one-third (or forty-three) of the leaves.

To his lifelong delight, Tischendorf had acquired a portion of a 1,500-year-old Greek version of the Bible! Now known as Codex Sinaiticus ("the Sinai book," because of where it was discovered), this fourth-century manuscript is especially prized because it helps modern scholars see how their ancient colleagues labored to preserve the correct wording of the biblical text down through the centuries.

Back in Europe, Tischendorf donated these forty-three leaves to the Leipzig University Library, refusing to divulge where he had found them. In 1846, he published their contents—the Old Testament books 1 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and Esther. Then he began to dream (and perhaps scheme) of returning to Saint Catherine's to acquire the rest.

Dr. Dirk Jongkind, former curator of the codex at the British Library, says it is easy to imagine Tischendorf's excitement, as these leaves are not only old but majestic. Jongkind recently finished an exhaustive project that utilized this ancient codex, among others, to produce a rich, interactive biblical text project, *The Greek New Testament, Produced at Tyndale House, Cambridge.* He describes an encounter with the great

Every time I see [it], the sheer size of the manuscript strikes me. Many Greek manuscripts are just fragments or have just one or perhaps even two columns; yet here we have four columns in the prose sections with generous margins all around. And then it quickly becomes clear how much this manuscript is an accumulation of many centuries of transmission history. The production phase with a team of different scribes is the oldest layer. Then you get a group of corrections that are made a few centuries later. You get medieval Arabic notes and some late Greek annotations all the way up to modern times with library stamps and folio numbers in pencil. The parchment is as thin as possible, the surface smooth, and, though some sections have suffered through the ages, the characteristics of good parchment have preserved most of the text in exquisite detail.2

How did we get from Moses receiving stone tablets at the top of Mount Sinai to Constantin von Tischendorf drooling over old parchments at the base of Sinai some three millennia later?

How did this book we call the Bible come to be?

Ask random people on the street that question, and in most cases, you will get blank stares and shoulder shrugs. Or you may hear such wildly imaginative answers as:

- "The Bible is a bunch of made-up stories that religious people claim to be revelations from God."
- "I'm not exactly sure, but I'm guessing angels were involved?"
- "At various times and places, God would start speaking out loud, and people like Moses and Paul would grab their writing utensils. They were like ancient secretaries. The process was like divine dictation."
- "The Spirit of God would come over people and put them into a spiritual trance. When this happened, they scribbled furiously the inspired thoughts they were having, as if they were channeling God."

People have all sorts of theories and ideas about *how* the Bible was written. The truth is, we are not sure exactly *how* this mysterious process worked. All we know is that the Bible purports to describe remarkable, divine encounters. And it claims to convey the very utterances of God. This is why, some 400 times in the Hebrew Bible, we find the phrase, "Thus says the Lord."

Another thing we don't know is how soon after the fact biblical events were recorded. Traditionalists believe that Moses was the human writer chiefly responsible for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (known collectively as the Torah, Law, or Pentateuch). For them, this means that the process of Moses receiving and recording holy revelations began at Mount Sinai and continued for his remaining forty years of life. Between the events at Sinai and his final addresses to the Israelite people, Moses is said to have penned Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Others, influenced by the nineteenth-century German scholar Julius Wellhausen, cite different writing styles and vocabularies throughout the Pentateuch. The idea behind what has been termed the *documentary hypothesis* is that these five biblical books were not penned by Moses between 1300 and 1200 BCE but were instead compiled by scribes between about 950 and 500 BCE. According to this theory, these writers relied on the nation's rich oral traditions and on written records that had been passed down by prior generations. (Considerable challenges have led to modification of specific details of the documentary hypothesis.)

Whichever view one takes about the authorship of the Pentateuch, two things are clear: Ancient Jewish culture, like other primitive and modern cultures, *did* tell, retell, and even memorize stories. And the ancient Hebrews could read, write, and keep records (Exodus 17:14; Deuteronomy 10:1–4; 27:2–3, 8; 31:19, 24–26). They recorded information—both important and trivial—for posterity. Archaeologists have found ancient Hebrew inscriptions on everything from walls to pottery.

To a degree, these realities make moot the question of when the original documents of Scripture came into existence. Before literacy was widespread, and even after it became common, history was preserved orally, via stories. This is how values were transmitted, how cultures bonded, and how people were entertained.

Can you picture a group of nomadic people clustered around a desert campfire at night as they sing a song about a great victory over an enemy tribe? Can you imagine them as they listen to a sage

tell tales of ancient heroes? If so, then you have a good sense of how parts of the Hebrew Bible may have been passed down before they were put into written form. The book of Exodus describes Moses and the people preserving their history in this way: "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord" (Exodus 15:1).

The Bible records another example of this kind of ancient recordkeeping (or remembering) in Jeremiah 36. God tells the prophet Jeremiah, "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today" (Jeremiah 36:2).

This command implies that the prophet had either a remarkable memory or some kind of careful, written record of prior revelations. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Jeremiah summoned his secretary: "Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him" (Jeremiah 36:4).

Whether you believe the stories in the Bible are real or made up, whether you believe they were written down right away or compiled much later, whether you believe the writers relied on great memories or reliable records or both, the message of the Bible—and the making of the Bible—are rooted in story. Good stories get told repeatedly, and the best stories almost always make their way into print.

This is true even in our time. You go to lunch with an old college pal who has a knack for getting into odd situations. Your friend, who is an engaging storyteller, proceeds to tell you about a bizarre weekend camping trip that included a flash flood, a runaway Shetland pony, and two Elvis impersonators. You are amused and amazed. Back at work, what do you do? You know exactly what you do. During a break, you turn to your colleague and say, "Okay, listen to the crazy story I heard at lunch . . ." Maybe you even write up the account and e-mail it to a few others. Perhaps you share it on Facebook.

This is exactly what the ancients did—in the days before cubicles and social media. Memorable stories were repeated orally around campfires and at tribal gatherings. They were learned by heart and passed on to children and grandchildren while hunting, preparing food, or getting ready for bed. At some point, especially noteworthy stories were written down—not on the Internet, of course, but using ancient writing materials. By the time of the Greeks, they were even put into long prose form and recounted from memory in huge amphitheaters.

We don't know exactly *when* the biblical authors sat down to record Israel's religious history for posterity. But at certain points along the way, the spoken word became the written word. These inscribed words, like their oral ancestors, were then passed along. They were copied and recopied. Compared and corrected. Collected and organized. Translated from Hebrew into Greek, Aramaic, and other languages. Bound in book form and carried to obscure places—like to a monastery at the base

of a mountain called Sinai. There they were read, then stored or hidden . . . until someone with bushy sideburns came looking for them centuries later.

In 1853, Dr. Tischendorf returned to Saint Catherine's, in hopes of obtaining the eighty-six leaves of the rare manuscript he had left behind on his first trip. This time, the monks, suspicious of Tischendorf's not-so-veiled desire to remove documents from their monastery, were not as generous. He left with only a leather fragment of Genesis that he claimed was being used as a bookmark.

Ancient peoples wrote on all sorts of surfaces: wet clay, stone, bone, metals, and pottery (the shards of which are called *ostraca*).³ For the biblical writers, the preferred materials were parchment and papyrus.

Many people think of *parchment* as brownish-colored paper that appears old and wrinkly, like the material on which replicas of America's Declaration of Independence are printed. In the world of ancient documents, however, parchment is animal skin—the hides of sheep, goats, cattle, even antelope—stretched thin, dried, and then cut like paper. (Although there were different ways of processing skins, we are using the term *parchment* here to refer to

animal skin prepared for writing.) The highest quality parchments are referred to as *vellum*.

Parchment, as you might imagine, was expensive to produce. A large codex such as Sinaiticus would require the skins of perhaps 200 animals! For this reason, some parchments were reused. The old ink was scraped off, and new information was written on the leathery surface (such a recycled parchment is referred to as a *palimpsest*). Because of its durable nature, parchment was popular until the late Middle Ages. That's when the Chinese introduced a paper made of cotton or hemp.

Papyrus is the other primary writing material of ancient documents. It was made from a tall, marshy plant that grew in delta regions such as the Nile. The plant's stems were cut open, sliced into strips, then placed side by side. A second layer of strips was laid at right angles to the first. When pressed tightly together and dried, the result was a usable kind of paper.

For writing on these various materials, reed pens were preferred. Ink was typically brown or black in color, and it was made from a solution of soot and gum or resin.

What about size? Our modern books are usually compact and easy to carry. With an e-reader, you can carry a thousand or more books with you at all times! Contemporary books also come with a table of contents, page numbers, and often an index.

Ancient biblical works possessed none of these features. Those written on parchment took the form of bulky scrolls, rolled up on sticks. With no chapter or verse divisions (those innovations didn't come about until the 1200s and 1500s, respectively), and

with some scrolls being more than thirty feet in length, locating a specific passage proved to be a constant challenge, even though carefully placed spaces were used to divide paragraphs. What's more, all that unrolling and rerolling meant great wear and tear on the parchment.

Around the end of the first century CE, a different and more durable kind of document came into vogue—the *codex*. Codices (plural) closely resemble our modern books. They had leaves (pages) that were made of sheets of papyrus or parchment that had been folded and then stitched together. This format, unlike the scroll format, allowed for writing on both sides of the page, thus conserving space and saving on production expenses. It also meant that separate writings could be collected and bound together.

In February 1859—perhaps thinking, *The third time's a charm*—everyone's favorite German codex collector was back at Saint Catherine's. Pictures reveal Constantin von Tischendorf to be a plump man, possessing either a large forehead or quite a bit less hair, depending on your point of view. He was funded on this particular trip by none other than Alexander II, tsar of Russia.

Remembering the failure of his previous visit to Sinai, Tischendorf went out of his way to avoid discussing manuscripts with the monks. On the final night of his stay, he reportedly gave the monastery steward a gift: a recently published copy of the Septuagint. The steward responded to this gesture by saying, "I, too, have a

Septuagint." Taking Tischendorf to his chamber, the man retrieved a bundle wrapped in red cloth. Inside the cloth lay the rest of the 1,500-year-old manuscript Tischendorf had been dreaming about for fifteen years.

As nonchalantly as possible, Tischendorf asked if he might spend the evening looking over the ancient book. Granted this privilege, the scholar stayed up all night reading, studying, and making notes from the codex's 347 leaves. He later wrote about the experience in his diary, "It really seemed a sacrilege to sleep."

The codex contained the entire New Testament (regarded as the oldest complete copy in existence) and about half of the Old. It also included the complete Apocrypha (the extra books that some, but not all, people of faith accept as inspired Scripture). What's more, it contained two additional extrabiblical works from the second century—much of the Shepherd of Hermas, and all of the Epistle of Barnabas. It didn't take long for Tischendorf to conclude that this book was "the most precious Biblical treasure in existence."

The day of his departure, Tischendorf offered to buy the manuscript from Saint Catherine's. The monk in charge would not sell it. Could he take it to the monastery's extension in Cairo to study it? Again, the eager scholar was rebuffed.

According to which source you read, the details vary regarding what happened next. The most circulated version of events says that Tischendorf prevailed upon the abbot of Saint Catherine's in Cairo to send for the manuscript. From March to May he was allowed to examine the codex eight leaves at a time. With the help

of two German associates who knew some Greek, Tischendorf transcribed the entire document.

As the scholar continued his travels in the Middle East, he couldn't get the codex off his mind. In September, Tischendorf returned to Cairo and worked out a deal to borrow the ancient book. Promising to return it safely to the monastery, he was allowed to take it to St. Petersburg, Russia, and compare it to his recent transcription. This is where everything got weird.

What the monastery thought was a strict loan agreement, Tischendorf apparently saw as a loan with an option to donate. All along he had been pressuring the monastery to part with the codex, to bequeath it to the tsar. (He had learned that it was time to select a new abbot for the monks at Saint Catherine's. Perhaps he argued, the tsar—as the civil protector of the Greek Orthodox Church, and one with influence in such matters—might be persuaded to appoint the abbot of the monks' choosing, in exchange for their gift of this old Greek manuscript?)

The entire arrangement became a giant, messy misunderstanding. But all the back-and-forth claims aside, these facts remain: Tischendorf got his precious codex, and he eventually published a facsimile edition at Leipzig. Then, after the codex sat for seven years in St. Petersburg, it was "donated" in 1869 to the tsar by the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Sinai on behalf of the Sinai monks. It never returned to Saint Catherine's.

In exchange for this priceless artifact, the monastery received 9,000 rubles, a silver shrine, and the appointment of their candidate as abbot.

Four years later Constantin von Tischendorf died at age fiftynine, reportedly from overwork and exhaustion. In 2015, on the occasion of his two hundredth birthday, some hailed Tischendorf as a hero. Others remembered him as a scoundrel.⁶

The story of Codex Sinaiticus doesn't end with the death of Dr. Tischendorf. Following the Russian Revolution, Joseph Stalin's government, hungry for cash, sold the 347 leaves of this ancient codex to the British Museum for what was then the equivalent of half a million dollars. The codex arrived the day after Christmas in 1933. To this day, tourists to London can see this priceless treasure with their own eyes.

In May 1975, while officials at Saint Catherine's were cleaning out a room under Saint George's Chapel, they came across a stack of old documents and manuscript fragments. In this cache of papers were eighteen more pages (or page fragments) of the 1,500-year-old codex!

Thanks to Constantin von Tischendorf's three visits to the base of Mount Sinai, 414 of Codex Sinaiticus' leaves (estimated to originally number about 740) have been preserved. Today, these parchments live in four different places: the British Museum (347 leaves), the Leipzig University Library (43 leaves), the National Library of Russia (portions of 6 leaves), and the 18 leaves found in 1975 and remaining at Saint Catherine's. Among the missing pages? All five books of the Pentateuch—the books that tell the

beginning of Israel's story and the related story of how at Sinai the world began to get the remarkable book we call the Bible.

It is thanks to another man, who lived some 3,100 years before Tischendorf and who, according to the biblical narrative, made multiple trips up and down Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3, 8, 20; 20:1–19, 21; 24:9, 11, 12; 32:1–4, 31; 34:2), that we have those remarkable details. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, Moses's famous stone tablets, together with the other writings God told him to undertake, are the beginning of the Bible. The Bible records that this book of the covenant was placed in something called the "ark of the covenant," and then Moses and the Israelites departed Sinai (Numbers 10:12).