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2023

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THE BIBLE AS BOOK

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Fall 20XX
MWF
50 min.

This supplemental syllabus section is intended to complement a course at a liberal arts Christian college, an introduction to the history of Christianity. The Bible is frequently discussed in this course, highlighting canonization, authority, interpretation, and reception. These additional readings and assignments introduce the *materiality* of the Christian Bible. Students will draw connections between themes and developments in Christian history and the material form of the Bible. This material could be incorporated as a unit, with consecutive class days over two weeks (assuming a MWF schedule), or to be added throughout the course at the chronologically appropriate time. This material also assumes there is no ready access to a rare book library or archive, so students are directed to use digitized version of the Bible. When possible, the instructor will bring in facsimiles to help students engage with the materiality of the text.

The key objectives to this supplemental course material are:

- To trace the historical development of the Bible as a material object.
- To understand how the Bible's materiality reflects its historical context.
- To explore how the materiality of the Bible affects engagement with the Bible.
- To introduce the basics of book history.

INTRODUCTION

Reading

James Raven, "Introduction," *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book* (Oxford University Press, 2020): 1–11.

Konrad Schmid and Jens Schröter, "What is 'the Bible?'" *The Making of the Bible: From the First Fragments to Sacred Scripture* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 1–3.

Activity and Discussion

Students will split into groups and rotate through a series of different formats of the biblical text: Dead Sea Scroll (facsimile), Greek NT fragment (facsimile), illuminated medieval psalter (facsimile), medieval Slavonic psalter (facsimile), 19th century family Bible, modern study Bible (NIV), Amharic Bible, Alabaster Bible, iPad with Bible app, Wonder Bible (audio Bible). Students will fill out the "Bible Description Sheet" (see Appendix A) for at least three of these Bibles.

Can we classify all of these as books? Why or why not? What is most "Bible-y" about each of these objects? What are common features? Unique features?

THE HEBREW BIBLE

Reading and Discussion

David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History*, Sections of “Chapter One: The Torah Scroll,” (University of Washington Press, 2017), 11–32.

- How did the Bible circulate in Israelite culture? How did the scroll possibly affect the stabilization process of the biblical text? What does the materiality of the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal about the Qumran community’s engagement with the biblical text? What was the significance of the rabbi’s requirement a Sefer Torah be a single scroll containing the whole Pentateuch?

Assignment

Examine images of two significant Jewish scrolls, filling out the “Bible Description” sheet for each (as best as possible).

- [The Great Isaiah Scroll](#) (The Israel Museum Jerusalem)
- [Sefer Torah, Rotula 2](#) (Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna)

EARLY CHRISTIAN BIBLES

Reading and Discussion

Justo L. González, “The Physical Appearance of Early Christian Bibles,” and “The Reading and Use of the Bible in Worship,” *The Bible in the Early Church* (Eerdmans, 2022). 32-40, 63-78.

- What is a codex? What are some differences between a codex and a scroll? How did most early Christians encounter the Bible? How did the format of the Bible shape engagement with the text? Or, how did engagement shape the text? What was the intended use for each of the Bibles assigned to view online? How do they reflect the “translatability” of Christianity?

Assignment

Examine two of the following and fill out Bible Description for both.

- [P1, P.Oxy. 2, E 2746](#) (University of Pennsylvania)
- [Codex Sinaiticus](#) (British Library, National Library of Russia, St. Catherine’s Monastery, Leipzig University Library)
- [Abbā Garimā Gospels 1](#) (Hill Museum and Manuscript Library) To view this manuscript, please create a free account.
- [Codex Argenteus](#) (Uppsala University Library) Most of the notes are in Swedish, so please use Google Translate to get a general understanding.

MEDIEVAL BIBLES

Reading and Discussion

Laura Light, “The Thirteenth Century and the Paris Bible,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 2: From 600 to 1450*, ed. E. Ann Matter and Richard Marsden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 380–391.

- What is a pandect? What is the significance of a “pandect” Bible? How does the Paris Pocket Bible reflect developments in medieval Christianity in the West?

Caitlin Smith, [“Read to Yourself, Please: Oral and Silent Medieval Reading Practices.”](#)

- This blog summarizes one scholar’s argument about the interaction between reading practices and biblical format.¹ How would people interact with the biblical text different if they were listening, reading aloud, or reading silently? Based on your assignment with Luke 2, how did the different modes of reading affect your engagement with the text?

R.S. Sugirtharajah, “The Bible as a Marginal and a Minority Text,” *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge University Press, 2001): 27–30. [The students, in theory, already know about the encounter of Syrian Christianity with Chinese culture.]

- How does the Xi’an Stele reflect the interaction between Syrian Christianity and Chinese culture? How does it function as a “surrogate Bible”?

Assignment

Complete a Bible Description for [Bodleian Library MS. Lat. Bibl. 2. 7. “The de Brailes Bible”](#) (Bodleian Library).

Complete the “Orality, Reading, and Images” assignment (see Appendix B).

EARLY MODERN BIBLES

Reading and Discussion

Eugene F. Rice, Jr. and Anthony Grafton, “Science, Technology, and Discovery” *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559*, 1–10.

- What did the earliest printed books resemble? What was the impact of print on how books were made and produced? How would these changes affect the production of Bibles?

Christopher de Hamel, “Bibles of the Protestant Reformation,” in *The Book: A History of the Bible* (Phaidon Press, 2001): 234–237.

¹ Paul Saenger, “Written Culture at the End of the Middle Ages,” in *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford university Press, 1997), 256–276.

- What were some unique features of the 1534 Luther Bible? How did the Bible reflect debates and development of the Protestant Reformation? How would a reader engage with the text?

Assignment

Fill out a Bible Description for [The Geneva Bible](#). Then, pick out a medium-length chapter to read. Read all marginal notations as they appear in the text. What are common themes in this notations? How do they relate to the biblical text? Please list all cross references, and ACTUALLY cross reference them as you come across them. How did this affect your reading experience?²

Explore the Newberry Library's online exhibition "[The Aztecs and the Making of Colonial Mexico.](#)" Then explore the [Epistolae et Evangelia](#) (Vault Ayer MS 1467, Newberry Library), selections of the Bible translated into Nahuatl, featured in the "Christianizing the Nahua."

MODERN BIBLES

Readings and Discussion

Leslie Howsam and Scott McLaren, "Producing the Text: Production and Distribution of Popular Editions of the Bible," *New Cambridge History of the Bible Volume 3: From 1750 to the Present*, ed. John Riches (Cambridge University Press, 2015): 49–62

- What were some technological advances that changed the production of Bibles in the 18th and 19th century? How did the intended audiences change? How do the Bibles of the ABS and BFBS reflect Western Christianity in this era?

Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Brill, 2000), 39–49 (pay particular attention to the African woodcuts).

- How is the Bible as *text* and as *book* tied to the colonial encounter with Christianity? What is the significance of the woodcuts mentioned on page 39?

Assignment

Select two of the following and fill out a Bible Description (and check library holdings for physical copies): *Nova Vulgata* (Brespols, 1986), *Biblia Habari Njema* (Vyama Vya Biblia Kenya na Tanzania 1995), [The New Testament in Choctaw](#) (American Bible Society), *The Gospels* (Alabaster, see [website](#) for images of interior)

² This exercise was inspired by Femke Molekamp, "Early Modern Englishwomen and Modes of Bible-Reading," in *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious Reading and Writing* (Oxford, 2013), 51-83.

THE DIGITAL BIBLE

Reading and Discussion

Jeffrey S. Siker, "Survey Says," in *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in a Digital World* (Fortress Press, 2017): 102-124.

- What surprised you about the statistics shared in this chapter? What is "liquid scripture?" What parameters are used to define "the Bible" in the 21st century?

Assignment

Complete one final Bible description using YouVersion app or [website](#). Note the different features of the website, how different translations are presented, and how different formats are available for engagement.

THE BIBLE AS BOOK PROJECT³

Create a visual presentation in any form you'd like: PowerPoint, video, social media page, etc., highlighting one Bible we've discussed or another significant Bible of your choosing (please consult with the professor first). First, set the scene for us. Place the Bible in its context in the history of Christianity. How does the materiality of the text reflect historical developments? Is the Bible reflective (or not) of its time or was it an innovation? How does this Bible reflect themes of course, especially the translatability of Christianity?⁴ Then, using some of the analytical tools you've learned, showcase at least five of the material features of the Bible. Make sure to comment on how these features would shape engagement with the Bible.

³ ³ Adapted from Neil Safier, Hannah Alpert-Abrams, and Stijn van Rossem, "2: Books in Context" (Syllabus from "History of the Book in the Americas and Beyond," Brown University, Spring 2019), <https://halperta.com/2019-bookhistory/assignments/>.

⁴Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis Books, 2009).

APPENDIX A: BIBLE DESCRIPTION SHEET ⁵

Examine the Bible, filling out all applicable sections. If using a digitized version, use the website information as best as possible.

Bible	
Format	
Size	
Medium	
Binding	
Typeface	
Place of Origin	
Scribe/Maker	
Translator	
Publisher	
Date	
Language	
Content	
Formatting (columns, chapters, sections, etc.)	
Images	
Paratexts (marginal notes, prefaces, etc.)	
Intended Use	
Intended Market	
Emotions Invoked	
Anything Unusual	

⁵ Adapted from Neil Safier, Hannah Alpert-Abrams, and Stijn van Rossem, "Assignment 1: Rare Book Description" (Syllabus from "History of the Book in the Americas and Beyond," Brown University, Spring 2019), <https://halperta.com/2019-bookhistory/assignments/> and "Material Culture Exercise," (Exercise Template from "Rare Book Pedagogy Module, West Virginia University), <https://rarebookpedagogy.lib.wvu.edu/material-culture/mc-exercise-template>

APPENDIX B: ORALITY, READING, AND IMAGES⁶

Please complete four different tasks related to one biblical passage, the Gospel of Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. You’ll need a stopwatch and a writing utensil.

1. [Listen to the text](#). (0:00-0:48) What do you remember?
2. Read it out loud.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

How long did it take? What went through your mind while reading?

3. Silently read the text. How long did it take? Did you notice anything different about this time that you read it?
4. If possible, turn out the lights in your workspace and, using candlelight or a flashlight, copy out the text as accurately as possible. What standards did you use for “accuracy”? Also, add one illustration to your copy that you think best represents the main point of that passage. Why did you select that image and what does it communicate about the text?

⁶ Adapted from J. Paul Getty Museum Staff, “Looking at Illuminated Manuscripts: Exploring an Illuminated Manuscript Page” and Ann R. Hawkins, “Preparing Library School Graduate Students for Rare Book and Special Collections Jobs: Assignments and Exercises that Work,” in *Teaching Bibliography, Textual Criticism, and Book History* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), 74, 75–76. See also Michael Camille, “Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,” *Art History* 8 no. 1 (2985).