

How the Bible Came to Us - #11

The Bible in the Dark Ages

1. The history of the Bible from post-apostolic times until the present can be easily divided into three stages:
 - 1) The time from A.D. 200 through A.D. 600 is sometimes referred to as the Patristic period. In that period, Christianity grew under persecution and then grew “under acceptance.” Christianity was first persecuted and then, having become the imperial religion, was vigorously debated. Doctrines were discussed and Christianity was in competition with pagan, Greek, and Roman religions. It also underwent a vigorous competition with Judaism.
 - 2) During the period from about A.D. 600 through A.D. 1400, competing religious forces such as Judaism and Islam lost their influence. Islam was regarded as a threat from outside but was defeated by the forces of Charles Martel in the Battle of Tours in A.D. 732. Judaism was regarded as a religion of the past. Because Judaism did not accept Jesus Christ, it was considered a “has-been.”
 - 3) From the time of the Reformation until the present, the Bible has been in controversy. We will talk more about this period later. Remember that during the Middle Ages, the Bible was still copied at great expense and only by hand. The monks and priests who were primarily able to read the Scriptures for themselves often memorized portions which they used in their services.
2. During the Middle Ages, everything was given a biblical meaning. While the average person had contact with Scripture only through listening to it being read by church leaders, almost everything in an individual’s life was biblically oriented. The stages of an individual’s life included:
 - 1) baptism; 2) confirmation; 3) the Eucharist or mass; 4) penance; 5) extreme unction; and by choice, individuals could experience the sacrament of 6) marriage or 7) ordination.
3. Even the seasons of the year were not thought of as spring, summer, autumn, and winter but rather were called Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and the Ordinary Time—which spanned our Summer until Advent came again.
4. The great holidays that were celebrated were not national holidays but saint days. Many different saints were celebrated during the course of the year, ending with All Saints’ Day on November 1.
5. Even the hours of the day were marked out by prayers conducted by monks. In the middle of the night, Matins; then before dawn, Lauds; at the first hour, Prime; at the third hour, Terce; at the sixth hour, Sext; and at the ninth hour, None; followed in the evening by Vespers; and finally, a night prayer, called Compline.
6. Even places were given religious meanings. The great cathedrals served as centers of a larger community because they were the seat of the Bishop. Those very expensive buildings served as a kind of “peasant’s Bible” because many of the Bible stories were “told” by the

stained-glass windows. They were the only *direct* contact that many Christians had with biblical stories.

7. In another sense, medieval times were not that far removed from biblical times. Modes of transportation, whether on land or sea, modes of work, even means and methods of war were not much different from what they had been in biblical times. It was easy for the people in the Middle Ages to imagine themselves in biblical stories.
8. The Bible that everyone in western Europe looked to was Jerome's Latin Vulgate.
9. The main interpretation of Scripture took place as priests and monks explained the Scriptures, as they understood them, to their congregations in sermons or talks. In mainstream Christianity during the Middle Ages, only in a few places such as the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris was there serious study of Scripture and the seeking out of Jewish scholars to help Christians better understand the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.
10. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the great medieval universities at Bologna, Paris, and Oxford began to take a more professional and scientific approach to the study of Scriptures. The Bible was still regarded as the "Queen" of the university and the study of the Bible as the "queen of sciences." But the study was oriented toward imparting as much information about Scripture as possible in as short a period as possible. To have an "education," they had to know their Bible!
11. That was in direct contrast to the way the Bible was studied in monasteries and seminaries where people studied not so much the so-called "science" of the Bible but the "wisdom" of the Bible. In the universities the Bible was studied as a means of answering challenges from Jews, or from Islam, and from the newly developing world of science. In the monasteries the Bible was studied for wisdom to transform a person's life.
12. Unfortunately, much of biblical interpretation was simply a rehash of the ancient authors such as Augustine, Basil, and Origen. It was just assumed that those earlier authors understood and wrote "the truth" and there was nothing new to be discovered.
13. So, let us notice some fundamental "understandings" that prevailed in the Middle Ages:
 - 1) All of the Bible was given by God and thus was the ultimate, total, and unquestioned authority for men's lives. The purpose for studying the Bible was not questioning the text or even the meaning, but simply to discover God's will for man. It was just assumed that God as revealed in Scripture was smarter than humans!
 - 2) Since the Bible is God's "story" and given by God, when properly understood it must be completely harmonious. It was thus assumed that the story of the Old Testament naturally led to the fulfillment in the New Testament which naturally led to the traditions and events affecting people's lives in the Middle Ages.
14. Christians, in general, made a sharp distinction between the "moral law"—such as the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 or the "law of love" in Leviticus 19:18—and the "ritual" or "ceremonial law" which was considered to be no longer binding for Christians. And so, one

of the questions which arose was, “Why are all those rules and requirements included in Scripture?” They came to be interpreted as figures or predictions of Christian ideas and events which took place later. It was assumed that the Bible—when correctly understood—did not have any true contradictions, despite superficial appearances. It was also assumed that tradition carried on by the church and handed down from generation to generation was continuous with what the Bible had previously taught. For example, ways were found to interpret apparent contradictions between Paul and James.

15. It was understood, just as it had been understood by Jews earlier, that the Scripture could be interpreted in several different ways:

1) There was the literal, historical interpretation which no longer seemed very relevant to Christians since it had taken place a long time ago.

2) The Scriptures could be interpreted allegorically. Thus, almost every part of the Old Testament was taken as somehow symbolic and allegorical for some Christian experience. For example, Noah’s ark was interpreted as a symbol of baptism in which the church served as the boat which saved people from the evil of this world.

3) The Bible also could be interpreted as speaking to the moral life and spiritual development of an individual Christian. Just as the people of Israel were delivered from Egyptian slavery through the exodus and Jesus showed the way from death to life through His crucifixion and resurrection, so the Christian’s progress in his spiritual life showed a similar pattern.

4) The Bible was interpreted as a guide to future heavenly things. Combined with pagan tradition and Zoroastrianism, the Bible was a source of information about angels and saints. It was the only source of information about the final events of this earth’s history or eschatology. It was considered to be the ultimate source of information about death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

16. As we mentioned, the great universities were beginning to arise, and Christians in those universities studied the Bible to find tools to refute Jews and Muslims. The great work of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, is a summary of arguments against the nations—a summary of tools to refute Jews and Muslims.

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Info@theox.org

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