

How the Bible Came to Us - #9 Monks and Monasteries

1. For more than a thousand years during what are sometimes called the Dark Ages, the Bible was largely confined to monasteries and nunneries. (Later, we will talk about Jewish schools which safeguarded Scripture.)
2. The secular world was largely illiterate, and society was fragile. Most of a person's time was spent merely surviving.
3. Beginning in the 4th century, some individuals in the eastern Mediterranean area took up an ascetic form of life in which they isolated themselves from ordinary human endeavors and devoted their lives entirely to prayer and to studying the Bible. Two main areas of the eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Egypt, focused on that type of Christianity. Christian monks found Egypt attractive because in times of persecution, it was easy for them to escape from the Nile Valley into the obscure portions of the desert on either side.
4. In Syria, outside of Antioch, Saint Simeon Stylites started one order of monasticism by living most of his life on top of a pillar or column. At first, the pillar was relatively short, but in later years, it was as high as 60 feet. Saint Simeon would live up on the platform, study his Bible, and preach to those who would stand around his pillar and listen.
5. In the eastern Mediterranean, monasticism was largely an individual matter with each monk living almost the life of a hermit, denying himself of virtually any luxury—even married life, sex, and anything more than the basic necessities of food and shelter.
6. In the west, somewhat by contrast, John Cassian and Benedict of Nursia developed a form of monasticism which centered around a communal type of life. For more than a millennium, those monastic centers were the most vibrant part of Christianity. Those who lived in the monasteries had their daily routines strictly regimented around “prayer and work” (“*Ora et Labora*”) according to the rules written by St. Benedict.
7. If one wanted an education or if one wanted to have an opportunity to do almost anything of an intellectual nature, a monastery was the place.
8. But inhabitants of the monasteries did more than pray and copy Scripture. Monasteries were also centers for developing agricultural methods. Gregor Mendel made his observations in genetics while studying in a monastery. They formed islands of relative literacy and strict order in a time when the rest of society was anything but literate or orderly.
9. Before long, the monasteries, or in some cases groups of monasteries, grew to considerable size. They were virtual cities which were largely self-contained. Some of the most famous centers in the east were Mt. Athos where there were as many as 20 monasteries and at the foot of Mount Sinai where St. Catherine's monastery was established in the 6th century.
10. In the west, St. Benedict (A.D. 529) and his group formed Monte Cassino and hundreds of other monasteries. Cluny (ca. A.D. 950) developed a monastic order which eventually included 1000 monasteries.

11. It was the original intent for those monasteries to replicate as nearly as possible the life of the early Christians as depicted in the book of Acts. The main emphasis was to follow the *Rule* (which was spelled out, for example, in the *Rule of Benedict*) and the abbot. They shared all their possessions and their lives were devoted to prayer and to worship.
12. Following the guidance of St. Benedict in his rulebook, virtually every aspect of daily life was governed by Scripture.
13. There were two major levels of monks. There were *choir monks* who spent more than four hours every day performing the work of God (*Opus Dei*). They were ordained as priests and received a good education. Their work was intellectual.
14. By contrast, each monastery had a large number of *lay brothers* who took simpler vows, had a less intense form of prayers and worship, and spent long hours in manual labor to sustain the monastery's form of life.
15. For the choir monks, the recitation or singing of the *Opus Dei* was divided into 8 times of prayer every day. These were done as a group. They were given special names based on the time of the day at which they occurred: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.
16. The main portions of Scripture recited during those worship services were from the Psalms. It was expected that every week, the entire book of Psalms would be repeated, and some of the more common or favorite Psalms would be repeated many times.
17. Certain chants were developed from New Testament passages as well. Those became part of Lauds, Vespers, and Compline.
18. The longest single worship time occurred early in the morning and was named Matins. During that time, they not only quoted Scripture or read Scripture but also listened to sermons and treatises from the early Catholic fathers (Basil, Augustine, Ambrose, and Gregory the Great).
19. The mass would be performed at least once every day, often done in a more private side chapel, and involved reading of Scripture in a different setting.
20. The holy reading, or *Lectio Divina*, of either passages from the Bible or from the early Church fathers was the basis for contemplation or prayer for individual monks.
21. Those who were especially privileged participated in "the love of learning and the desire for God" (Jean LeClerque) and formed the basis for the work of copying Scripture. Everything had to be copied by hand. Large rooms were built and set aside specifically for that sacred work.
22. Copies of the special songs to be used in worship services were made in sufficient number so that no more than three monks had to follow a single copy. Because of frequent use, those readings or portions of Scripture had to be copied repeatedly. Specific, special readings for special occasions during the sacred year had to be prepared as well.
23. Also, special *Graduals* had to be made for guiding the singing and responses at mass.
24. In addition to all of those usual tasks, the monks were occasionally asked to copy portions of the Scripture. Because that was a special privilege, it was done with great devotion, often

under very difficult and less than comfortable circumstances.

25. The copying of biblical manuscripts in both Greek and Latin became a very important part of the monastic way of life. That task continued even hundreds of years after printing was invented. Occasionally, other important books were copied by the monks.
26. Thus, monasteries often developed enormous libraries of very valuable works that became targets for being looted following the Protestant Reformation.
27. Two other special aspects of the copying of Scripture or the safeguarding of Scripture need to be noted:
 - 1) Interesting, unusual, and often deeply-intellectual interpretations of Scripture became parts of some of the chants that were used.
 - 2) Some monks with artistic abilities illustrated the Scripture with beautiful, multicolored illustrations. Sometimes, the artwork took the form of enlargement and fancy expression of the first letter of the paragraph. On other occasions, pictures of biblical events were drawn.
28. It is important for modern-day Christians not to fall into either of two traps. We should not romanticize the monastic life as some Catholics have done. However, neither should we demonize monastic life as many Protestants have done. We need to remember that a very important work was done in those monasteries. They were the intellectual and spiritual centers during the Dark Ages. However, they were also centers of wealth and, at times, centers of abuse.

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Info@theox.org

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