

1 THE BIBLE AND ITS CONTEXT

There can be no doubt about the Bible's status as one of the great classics of world literature. Its most recent parts were written something like 2,000 years ago, yet it is still a bestseller in the bookstores, while a search for the word 'Bible' on the worldwide web highlights well over 100 million sites, and its entire text can be found online in more than fifty different versions. It has been translated into more languages than any other book, and has had a profound influence on the whole history of world civilization. Men and women have died for the privilege of being able to read it, and even today millions of people throughout the world avidly read it as a source of personal guidance for daily living.

The Bible has also been the inspiration behind many of the most radical social reforms of recent centuries. Inspired by what he read in its pages, the British politician William Wilberforce (1759–1833) embarked on a campaign that would eventually lead to the outlawing of slavery. Slightly later, another politician, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (1801–1885), committed himself to stopping the exploitation of women and children by their employers – again, inspired by what he read in the pages of the Bible. In the middle of the twentieth century, the African-American church leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr (1929–68) initiated a process that led to fundamental changes in relationships between the races in the USA, on the basis of what he knew of the Bible and its message. At the end of the twentieth century, much of the pressure that brought about the collapse of the system of



View of Jerusalem's old city with the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount in view.

apartheid that segregated the races in South Africa came from church groups that were fired by the vision of a better way of living which they read about in the Bible.

Moreover, Christians are not the only ones to have found inspiration in its pages. In his search for spiritual wisdom, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) became an avid Bible student, and the teachings of Jesus on turning the other cheek and loving enemies¹ provided the operational model for his political campaigns. Though he lived an abstemious life, with few material goods, among his treasured possessions at the time of his assassination was a book entitled *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, along with a copy of John's Gospel, while a picture of Jesus adorned the wall of his home, carrying the inscription 'He is our peace' (a quotation from Ephesians 2:14, which explicitly links Jesus with the breaking down of barriers between different races).

Yet although the Bible continues to be valued as a source of moral guidance and social inspiration, it also raises many questions, not least in relation to the truth of its message. The notion of 'truth' is of course a slippery one in itself, and can be used to describe many different things, from historical or scientific veracity that can be studied in relation to other sources of knowledge, to the sort of truth about human life and its meaning that can only be tested by personal experience. This book is not designed to delve into such questions, but rather to examine the world of the Bible in a way that will enable serious searchers after truth to gain a better grasp of the social and cultural circumstances that called forth

its various books, and to reflect for themselves on its relevance for life in the rather different social context that is the twenty-first century.

Even that modest aim is not as straightforward as it can be made to seem, because actually there is no such thing as 'the world of the Bible' – for the simple reason that the Bible itself is not just a single book. A casual glance inside any Bible shows that it is divided into two main sections, usually called the Old and New Testaments – or, in terminology that better reflects its historical origins, the Hebrew Bible and the Second (or Christian) Testament. That is only the beginning of the story, however, for each of these major divisions also contains numerous shorter and self-contained books, thirty-nine of them in the first Testament and twenty-seven in the second. What we have here is an entire library of books that were written over a very considerable period of time. The Hebrew Bible consists of the literary archives of the ancient Israelites, starting with the beginning of time itself and then tracing the nation's early history through Abraham and his family, before eventually ending in the time of the Greek empire of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) and his successors. The New Testament reflects a rather shorter historical period, and all of its writings were written in the course of the first century AD. Even here, there is considerable diversity among its various books, some of which reflect life in Palestine, at the eastern fringe of the Roman empire, while others refer to the rather different lifestyles and worldviews that characterized the urban citizens of countries such as Greece and Italy.

This diversity is even reflected in the languages in which the various parts of the Bible were originally

written. As the name suggests, the books of the Hebrew Bible, the scriptures of the Jewish faith, were mostly written in Hebrew, though a handful of pages were in Aramaic, a language which achieved worldwide recognition during the period of the Persian empire (559–331 BC). The New Testament documents were written entirely in Greek, which, following the conquests of Alexander the Great, had become the international language of the whole of the Mediterranean world.

In the light of all these facts, the world of the Bible turns out to be many worlds. Its earliest historical narratives are set in the Stone Age, while its latest documents reflect the life of the early Roman empire. In the process of telling this story, Bible readers are introduced to the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as Greece and Rome. Even they are not homogeneous entities, for each of them underwent significant changes in the course of their own history. Then, interwoven through it all is the story of Abraham's family, the various people groups who traced their origins back to him, and their religious understandings of the world and its people. While it is perfectly possible to grasp the spiritual heart of the Bible's message without detailed knowledge of its historical background, placing its various books in the social contexts within which they were originally composed not only brings to life the characters who populate its pages, but also has the potential to illuminate many aspects of its message.

The value of such historical investigations can be illustrated by two stories, one from the nineteenth

century and the other from the twentieth. They concern the search for original manuscripts of the Bible, and are worth including here as examples of how casual discoveries and professional investigations have both played their part in broadening our understanding of the Bible and its world. They also highlight how political intrigue and dealings in the criminal underworld can influence, and sometimes skew, how our knowledge of the Bible's world is obtained.

Searching for the New Testament

You would hardly expect words like 'detective story' or 'treasure hunt' to be used in connection with the Bible, yet once we begin to explore the way in which some of the ancient documents have come to light, that kind of language seems entirely appropriate. For me, the search began one cold winter afternoon in the University of Glasgow, Scotland – not the most obvious place to look, perhaps, but the library there contains a remarkable accumulation of books and papers gathered together by one of the world's most adventurous collectors of ancient manuscripts. Constantin von Tischendorf (1815–74) was a professor at the University of Leipzig in Germany, and when he died the trustees of Trinity Theological College in Glasgow got the chance to purchase his library. It cost them the grand sum of £460, an amount which they raised first from their own donations, and then by an appeal to the Free Church Assembly in May 1877. The Assembly commended the collection to its people in glowing terms:

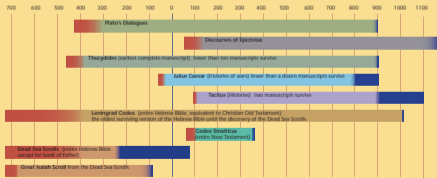
1. Matthew 5:38–48

DISCOVERING OLD BIBLES

It can be disconcerting for modern readers to learn that there is no such thing as a first edition of the Bible, and that no-one knows what happened to the actual documents in which its books were first written down. Probably they did not last beyond the generation in which they were produced. Even in the time of Jesus (the first century AD), the Hebrew Bible was known only through copies of copies, stretching back in a continuous line into the dim and distant past. In this respect, the Bible is no worse off than any other literature from the ancient world. We have no originals of the classics of ancient Greece and Rome either. The works of Julius Caesar, for example, were written in the first century BC but there are fewer than a dozen surviving manuscripts, and the oldest date from as late as AD 800-900 – almost a thousand years after Caesar lived. The histories of the Roman historian Tacitus are the same. His books were written towards the end of the first century AD, but most of them have

disappeared for good and our entire knowledge of what survives depends on only two manuscripts that date from the ninth and the eleventh centuries AD respectively. Things are exactly the same in the case of classical Greek writers. The earliest complete manuscript of the work of Thucydides (460-400 BC) dates from about AD 900, and there are fewer than ten manuscripts in all. In the ancient world no-one would have been surprised by this, but once people started to think more deeply about the Bible and its history it was both natural and inevitable to want to know where, exactly, these ancient books had come from, and more especially how we might be sure that the Bible in our hands is what its original authors intended it to be.

The date of writing (indicated in red) and the date of the oldest extant manuscript (indicated in blue) of some examples of classical literature and those of the Hebrew-Christian scriptures. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest version of the Old Testament that survived was the *Leipzig Codex*. This was produced some 1,400 years after the writing of the earliest book of the Old Testament. The discovery of the scrolls narrowed this gap to just a few centuries. The *Codex Sinaiticus* version of the books of the New Testament was produced only some 250-300 years after they were written.



'For this most interesting acquisition the Glasgow college and the Free Church are especially indebted to the zeal and energy of Professor Lindsay. He has also collected a large part of the amount required: and it is hoped that wealthy friends in the west will not leave him in anxiety as to the balance. There is no respect in which a wise munificence may be better exercised than in enabling our college libraries to acquire rare and valuable books beyond the reach of private individuals, and scarcely to be found in any of our public libraries.'

No-one seems to know how Professor Lindsay came across the papers. But he obviously had no shortage of wealthy friends, for they raised the cash required to buy them in a remarkably short time, and the Tischendorf collection found a permanent home in his college. From the fine words of the General Assembly you might have expected that these books would have been given pride of place. In fact they were left locked away in a library cupboard, unlisted and all but forgotten, for the next hundred years. Then in 1974, when Trinity College had fallen into such a state of disrepair that it was almost collapsing, they were rediscovered and presented to the University of Glasgow.

They document a fascinating story that starts in 1839 with the young Tischendorf, who at the time was twenty-four years old. Five years earlier he had gone to the University of Leipzig, where he developed a keen fascination for the New Testament. He decided to try to reconstruct its text in the exact words that its authors had originally written. He started work with such materials as he could find in Leipzig, but

soon realized that to make much progress he would have to travel a lot further afield. Many of the great libraries of Europe had lain undisturbed for centuries, and Tischendorf had a hunch that if he could get into some of them he would be able to unearth Bible manuscripts and other materials that had been ignored or forgotten for generations. As it turned out, his initial dreams were to be fulfilled beyond his greatest expectations. But like many great scholars and explorers, Tischendorf was not particularly well off, and so his first job was to persuade other, richer people that he was worth supporting. He started with his own government, and they gave him a grant of 100 thalers to cover his travel expenses. Considering that a mere 5 thalers would have bought a whole week's groceries for a family, this sounds like a very generous grant indeed. But Tischendorf was not impressed, and wrote in his diary:

'What was such a sum as this with which to undertake a long journey? Full of faith, however, in the proverb that 'God helps those who help themselves', and that what is right must prosper, I resolved, in 1840, to set out for Paris ... though I had not sufficient means to pay even for my traveling suit; and when I reached Paris I had only 50 thalers left. The other fifty had been spent on my journey.'



Constantin von Tischendorf, the New Testament critic who discovered the *Codex Sinaiticus*.