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Holy Books and eBooks

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Why have books been so highly regarded by the human race? Why do books occupy such an exalted position in many of the religions of the world? What is a Holy Book? Is it a tablet of stone on which the finger of **God** has written commandments, an ornamental scroll, an illuminated codex or even a first edition of a **Gutenberg Bible**? Perhaps it is an expensive volume, bound in Moroccan leather and embossed in gold, housing not only the Word of **God** but family records of births, marriages, and deaths. Finally, can the numinous quality of Holy Books survive in the virtual world?

While the oldest religious narratives and divine prophecies may have been transmitted orally, once they were committed to writing, the book which gave them embodiment quickly achieved quasi-holy status. The possession of a Holy Book became the chief incentive to literacy throughout the world, or even to the development of a written language for peoples who had none before **God** revealed Himself to them in words that needed to be preserved. In order to read Holy Books in holy languages, people from many linguistic families have laboriously learned Arabic, or Hebrew or Greek. With the coming of translations of sacred texts, vernacular languages have moved from the street, marketplace and home into the schools and churches.

It is not true that humans are the only species with the ability to communicate complex information; whales sometimes do this more efficiently than humans. But whales do not write books which record their memories, their philosophies or the exploits and oracles of their gods. The writing of books, more than any other activity, separates human beings from the other creatures with which they precariously share this planet.

Religions influenced by Semitic patterns of thought have been especially prone to scriptural veneration. In temples of the Sikh religion, *Adi Granth* is lovingly enshrined, draped in the finest silks and installed on a cot under an elaborate awning. Accorded the honors due a high potentate, this Holy Script is addressed as "true Emperor" and offered the finest gifts of food, flowers and gold. *Adi Granth* is awakened each morning with songs of praise by temple attendants, and each evening it is put to rest with lulling prayers. Sikhs take their marriage vows facing *Adi Granth* and request its leave when naming their children.

When the soldiers of **Indira Ghandi** desecrated the Golden Temple at Amritsar, they dishonored the Holy Book. This sacrilege was soon avenged by the lady's assassination.

In Jewish synagogues throughout the Diaspora and in the Holy Land itself, no service is more sacred than the Reading of the Law. While the congregation stands, the Scroll of the Law is removed from the ark which houses it in its central location in the house of worship. It is reverently carried to the Reading Desk, where it is read by an individual especially privileged by heritage or position in the community. He has first covered his head and uttered the essential prayers. The scroll is elevated for congregational veneration, and its fringes are kissed. It is then covered in its proper mantle and lovingly returned to the ark. Decaying scrolls are buried with ceremony; they are never burned.

Christianity has valued the *Bible* no less than have the Jews. In Medieval Catholicism the mana emanating from the *Bible* was considered too strong for the layperson, too dangerous to be in hands not fully consecrated and protected from its power. Yet the reading of Scripture occupied an important place in the mass, second only to the Blessed Sacrament itself. Christianity, with its faith firmly grounded in the material world, encouraged the production of what may well be the world's greatest body of visual art, as **Michelangelo** and **Leonardo** illustrated the great narratives and themes of Scripture.

Protestantism relied even more heavily on the *Bible*. The decisions of ecumenical councils of the church, the writings of the Greek and Latin Church fathers and the accumulated Sacred Tradition of the Church all were rejected or subordinated to the supremacy of Scripture. The Protestant enthusiasm for putting the *Bible* in the hands of every plowperson and giving it the central spot on a church lectern, replacing the altar itself, has seemed strange indeed to those for whom Roman Catholic worship is the norm. A scene from **Giuseppe Verdi's** opera *Stiffelio* demonstrates an outsider's interpretation of Protestant bibliolatry. In a climactic scene the tenor, usually an emotional Italian singing the role of a Protestant pastor, elevates the *Bible* to be adored by an otherwise austere assembly of singing church elders. More recently **Pat Boone**, a popular entertainer widely associated with Evangelical piety, went on record as affirming his faith in **Jesus** because the *Bible* gives witness to Him. Thus, the Holy Book was given precedence over the Holy Man Himself.

In a sea of infidels, Jews, Christians and sometimes Sikhs and Zoroastrians have been accorded a special status in Islamic civilization as "People of the Book." To possess a book in which the visions of prophets are preserved is a wondrous thing, qualifying a people for particular privileges.

Perhaps no people to whom a holy book has been vouchsafed have honored it more supremely than have faithful Moslems. As proof of the eternality of the *Koran* — whose heavenly prototype is engraved upon the throne of **God** itself — Moslem faithful have sometimes stressed the alleged illiteracy of the Prophet **Mohammed**, whose revelations, later recorded by his followers, delivered the Book to humankind. During his lifetime, when asked to verify his prophethood by a miracle, **Mohammed** is said to have simply indicated the *Koran*. Could any mortal, without divine aid, have produced such utterance? For Moslems, the *Koran* in Arabic is the direct word of **God**. Copying the Arabic script is the highest artistic act, and Arabic calligraphy is the fountainhead of all Moslem visual art. This "Mother of the Book" not only prescribes human conduct in this world and offers assurances and warnings for the next, but just the reading of its words in Arabic, even by one who does not understand the language, is meritorious.

The great religions of the world provide, among the other benefits they bestow, a link with the past, a preservation of heritage, a strong sense of the communion of the faithful, both living and dead. That they preserve what was loved of old is not surprising and is to be welcomed. But the major religions also affirm that their message is as valid for men and women in the twenty-first century as it was for folk in the Arabian desert in the seventh or in Palestine two thousand years ago. Even the most conservative religions have demonstrated the ability to adapt any new communication technology to their uses. Radio and television have proven excellent vehicles for spreading Gospels, enabling a **Billy Graham** to preach in one evening to more people than all previous priests, prophets, apostles or evangelists.

eBooks are only now in the early stages of their development. Many people do not like them. They are unpleasant to read in bed, they are awkward to navigate and they lack the visual beauty of the sweetest books. Just as the science fiction enthusiast longs for the smell and touch of the old pulp journals of his boyhood pleasures, we will continue for a time to demand the texture of our present books. But the convenience and durability of eBooks, aligned with the World Wide Web, will become evident with their constant expansion and improvement. As the Old Time Religion becomes more and more the On Line Religion, we will see how *Bible* study will be enhanced and eased by the new technology. Just as Greek texts were instrumental in spreading the Christian religion about the ancient Greco-Roman world, and the **Gutenberg** revolution in printing made possible the form that the Protestant Reformation took, so enthusiasts of the electronic media proclaim a new "fullness of time," when computers will instantly unite the world and universal evange-

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lism will finally be a reality. Electronic sources will become ever more visual and attractive; visual features will be animated, and major artists will express their visions aided by the new technology.

Already **Abington Press's** *New Interpreter's Bible* is available on CD-ROM, its entire twelve volumes condensed into a concise package. Two translations of the *Bible*, the NRSV and the NJV, are included in their entirety, along with the critical commentary and additional reflections on faith and life applications by prominent religious leaders. The *Maxima Bible Library* on CD-ROM provides all of twenty-four *Bible* translations, complete with commentaries and dictionaries, as well as links to **Josephus**. As a bonus, it adds a Holy Land Multimedia Tour and a selection of Christian ClipArt. Other sets now sold in stores and catalogs enable interactive comparative readings of **Philo** and **Josephus**, greatly expanding knowledge of the world in which the Christian *Bible* appeared. With programs and eBooks now in existence, it is possible to link the original languages of Scripture to favorite translations and a variety of alternate readings. The voice of a cultivated speaker of each language may be included, as well as that of a favorite actor reading from the authorized or any other English version of the *Bible*.

Luther's entire works may be purchased on CD-ROM for a reasonable price. Church history collections bring **Calvin** face to face with the Greek and Latin fathers of the Church. While Moslem resources of a comparable nature are not yet readily available, at least in the Western world, they will certainly come. Just as the call to prayer is now more frequently heard in the great Islamic cities of the world as a recorded message rather than through the living voice, the Mother of Books will surely make its message known through these super-efficient media.

Even if electronic Scriptures never attain the stature of sacred artifacts, the study of their contents will be greatly facilitated. We are at our best when holy writings engage us actively. The interactive virtual world is perhaps the most immersive medium that has yet been devised. Cyberspace will bring us into contact with *Bible* students, even scholars, from all over the world; our questions may be answered almost instantaneously by reference librarians in Israel or the Vatican. Collaborative *Bible* study through eBooks and the Internet may become the rule. The encyclopedic nature of digital environments will be awesome indeed.

The navigational possibilities provided by future eBooks will be especially suited to the study of a collection of documents as allusive and refractive as the *Holy Bible*, where a passage in *Matthew* may suggest a reading of *Isaiah*. From *Genesis* through *Revelation*, the themes and images of Scripture echo one another. Through hypertexts, passages may be instantly linked. **Janet H. Murray**, who teaches courses in interactive narrative at MIT and who has written prophetically about the nonlinear ad-

vantages of electronic storytelling, has identified the hypertextual, mosaic, and kaleidoscopic features of e-narrative as the likely inspiration of new art forms.¹ These are precisely the features which could make the study of Sacred Scriptures more personally rewarding and informative than it has ever been. Hypertext can provide an instantaneous linking of text, images, charts, tables, video clips, and oral messages. The mosaic nature of the new media makes possible a juxtaposition of many related features, which may then be scrutinized simultaneously, even with visual illustrations. In *Exodus*, **God** tells **Moses**, "I am that I am," while **Jesus** in *Revelation* announces "I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end." With a few clicks, these passages, with relevant commentaries, may be quickly compared. The kaleidoscopic possibilities of the new media further provide new ways of arranging information. With search engines and a multitude of links, rearrangements may be quickly made of study materials, perhaps in ways nobody ever thought of before.

One of the most welcome aids for exploring holy books, at least within the Christian context, is the work of major visual artists. Vivid illustrations have long been allowed for didactic purposes, even by the most austere Calvinists. Now can be added the ability to make virtual visits to great churches, shrines and cathedrals all over the world. A virtual tour of Jerusalem, reconstructed as it would have been in the time of **Christ**, will be more memorable than descriptive chapters in a traditional text. Virtual visits to the Seven Churches of the *Book of Revelation*, along with missionary journeys as companion to St. Paul, may become routine for students in the next few years.

There will always be strict Islamists reminding us that the *Koran* cannot really be translated and that there is a limit to embellishments that may be tolerated. The Christian guardians of Scriptural integrity will also throw upon all innovators the curses of the *Book of Revelation* on those who dare "to add or take away" from the sacred vision. While restraint is appropriate in dealing with Scriptures which have been treasured and conscientiously transmitted

through generations, *Bible* students will not be able to resist the enticements of the new media.

Yet it may be the non-canonical works of earlier religious devotion that can best prepare us for the wonders to come. I dream of making, during my lifetime, a grand virtual tour of **Dante's** *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. This will be the collaborative work of the finest translators, illustrators, animators and game makers, along with myself. I envision a *Divine Comedy* accessible in the late medieval Tuscan tongue, in modern Italian, and in English. Illustrators from **Michelangelo** through **William Blake** to **Leonard Baskin** have been inspired to illustrate **Dante** and in doing so have expended our vision and their own. Skilled contemporary artists will have visualized this netherworld for me (and possibly even the celestial one), and game makers will have animated it. I will travel at my own pace, conversing, as I choose, with the different characters I meet in Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. At any point, I may remember a person I quickly passed over. **Virgil** and I will then quickly backtrack to an earlier circle of the *Inferno*, so I can take another look and have a conversation. Or we may choose to advance to a higher rung of the Purgatorial mount, if I have limited time that particular day. As I move along, I will certainly try to comfort **Paola** and **Francesca**, in the outer reaches of Hell, but I will pause only briefly before **Pope Adrian V**, fearing to distract him from the earnest penance that will eventually win his release from Purgatory. Perhaps I may even reach the celestial city, though recreating it will be a supreme challenge for the artists and game makers; and I, in this fallen state, will feel as uncomfortable in the virtual Paradise as I do in the one on paper, as **Dante** certainly intended. When this Dantesque journey becomes available to me, I will not long lament the disappearance of my Penguin paperback with its awkward end notes and its yellowing pages.

Endnotes

1. Janet H. Murray, *The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press), 1997.

Here Lies The Book, R.I.P.: The Report of Its Death Has Been Greatly Exaggerated

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If you've kept up with libraries at all lately, you've doubtless witnessed what might be called the harbinger of the death of the book. Everywhere you turn, libraries are either "deserted," their books "vanishing," or the concept "obsolete." A \$53-million renovation at the **Walter Library, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities** sequestered books to the basement or else-

where. Supercomputers have replaced them. Book sequesterations at prestigious **Duke University** raised eyebrows. In the new **College of Charleston** library books have taken a decided backseat. **Marquette University** began with a traditional library structure but its trustees essentially said, "Nothing doing!" They wanted

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