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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 embedded 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 people 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 while humans 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 elaborately 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 Gandhi 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 manna 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 Greeks 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 person 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 bibilolatry. 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 "Prophets." 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 truth 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 is 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 religious have demonstrated the ability to adapt any new communication technology to their use. 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 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 bestest 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 entertainers of the electronic media proclaim a new "fullness of time," when computers will instantly unite the world and universal evan-
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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 Abingdon 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 NIV, 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-


by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

If you’ve kept up with libraries at all lately, you’ve doubtless witnessed what might be called the harbingers 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 elsewhere. Supercomputers have replaced them. Book sequestrations 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...