

## CHAPTER 1



# THE BIBLE

The Christian Bible was far and away the most influential text in the Middle Ages. For medieval (and modern) Christians, the Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament, which is a collection of books that tells the story of the Hebrew people, and the New Testament, a collection that provides the narrative and theological accounts of one particular Hebrew, Jesus Christ. Three-fourths of the Bible is made up of the Old Testament, the writings of the Hebrews. But when students and scholars set out to study the Middle Ages, they often pay far less attention to the New Testament, let alone the Old, than they do to the influence of classical antiquity and of early Christianity. Yet in the fourth century when Jerome translated the Bible into Latin in the version that became standard for the Middle Ages, he translated the Old Testament as well as the New, including what today are referred to as the Old Testament Apocrypha: books that for some Christians have not remained part of the standard collection, or canon, of Scripture, but which are nevertheless also significant. And the books of the Old Testament were hardly ignored in the Middle Ages. They were read, studied, memorized, quoted, commented upon, embodied in the liturgy, and depicted in art, though usually in what was perceived as their relationship to the New Testament. Thus, a brief survey of the kinds of documents that make up the Old Testament is a necessary starting point for an understanding of the Bible and an understanding of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament was written over a much longer time than the New; perhaps a thousand years separate the composition of the earliest from the latest texts, and some of the stories existed either orally or in writing long before they reached the form in which they have been handed down. The Old Testament consists of legends, historical narrative, laws, poetry, allegory, prophecy, songs, and wise sayings. The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) are called the Law (English), the Torah (Hebrew), or the Pentateuch (Greek). These books present, often in symbolic terms, the story of creation, the fall of humanity, the choosing of

the Hebrews by God, and their history until the death of Moses. Presumed in the Middle Ages to have been written by Moses, the Torah has always held a privileged place in Jewish and Christian understanding of the Bible. Many of the most familiar Bible stories are contained in these books: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, the Tower of Babel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, the bondage in Egypt, the exodus into Palestine, the reception of the Ten Commandments. A significant portion of these books, however, is also taken up with legal material and ritual prescriptions. Although this ritual material is more or less ignored by most Christians today, it captured the interest of medieval writers, and several long allegorical commentaries on the details of ritual and law were composed and widely known.

The next two books, Joshua and Judges, tell the story of the conquest of the Promised Land from the native inhabitants, the Canaanites. Perhaps the most famous stories in these books are Joshua at the battle of Jericho, and Samson and Delilah. In the Middle Ages, these books were seen as especially relevant during the Crusades, wars fought with the aim of reconquering the Promised Land, which had been captured by the Muslims in the seventh century. Imagery from Joshua and Judges pervades Crusade chronicles: the epitaph of the man who conquered Jerusalem in the First Crusade, for example, refers to him as another Joshua. More subtly, the theory of causation in Joshua and Judges—warriors will triumph in battle only if they act morally—is used to explain victories and losses in battle in the Crusades, and in warfare throughout the Middle Ages.

After the short book of Ruth come eight books, more or less historical in their orientation, that tell the story of the founding, flourishing, division, conquest, and restoration of the Hebrew monarchy. The stories of the anointing of Saul as first king of the Hebrews, the shepherd David's defeat of the Philistine giant Goliath, the civil war between David and Saul, and the victories and prosperity of David's reign after Saul had been killed are told in the First and Second Book of Kings, in modern translations called the First and Second Book of Samuel. (There are other differences between medieval and modern biblical terminology as well as differences in the numbering of some of the psalms.) The Third Book of Kings (First Book of Kings in modern translations) tells of the most wealthy and wise of all the Hebrew kings—Solomon—who, at the end of his life, turned away from the Hebrew God Yahweh (sometimes written YHWH or Jehovah) to worship foreign idols. It then goes on to narrate the split between the north and south (respectively, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah) after Solomon's death. The House of David ruled the south from Jerusalem while a succession of families attempted to rule in the north, eventually building a capital at Samaria. The Fourth Book of Kings continues to tell of the split and the falling away from the worship of Yahweh in both kingdoms, especially the northern one. The appearance of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Third and Fourth Book of Kings shows how moral authority among the Hebrews no longer rests with the monarchs but has passed to their harshest

critics. Fourth Kings also describes the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722–721 B.C.E. and the destruction of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 587–586 B.C.E. It was with the fall of Jerusalem in 587–586 B.C.E. that the Hebrew monarchy came to an end, and thousands of Hebrews were forced into exile in Babylonian territory. Whenever the theory and practice of monarchy are examined in the Middle Ages, the story of the rise and fall of the Hebrew monarchy is never far from the discussion.

There is no book in the Bible that gives a narrative of the actual events of the exile, but the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return from exile, the rebuilding of the Temple and the city walls, and the institution of religious reforms. After the restoration of the Temple in 516 B.C.E., the Hebrews were governed by foreign powers but generally were allowed to practice their religion undisturbed. There are no narrative accounts in the Old Testament extending from this time until the middle of the second century. However, when the Greek rulers of Palestine tried to enforce religious uniformity on the Hebrews around 160 B.C.E., a rebellion led by Judas Maccabaeus was successful in winning *de facto* freedom. The story of this revolt is narrated in the First and Second Book of Maccabees. After the revolt, there is no more historical narrative in the Old Testament.

In addition to these books, there are two types of literature in the Old Testament. One category is the prophets. A prophet, as implied earlier with the mention of Elijah and Elisha, is a messenger whom God raises up to confront his people, especially the leaders, with their faults, and warn them of the consequences if they continue to sin. Prophets also carry their warnings into the near and even distant future by predicting what is to come. The prophets Elijah and Elisha are among the important figures who appear in the narrative books of Hebrew Scriptures. But prophets also speak in their own voice in a group of sixteen books that are named after individual prophets. This group consists of the four so-called major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and the twelve minor prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). This division into major and minor is not meant to indicate the quality or importance of any prophetic book but rather its length and its placement in Scripture.

Although the writings of the prophets stretch out over several hundred years, the most important prophetic literature was written at the time of the disintegration of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and their destruction by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, respectively. During this time the prophets continue to insist that these cataclysmic events have more to do with internal problems such as the Hebrews' own lack of social justice and their religious hypocrisy and idolatry than with external threats. Many texts from these prophets were either quoted directly or clearly alluded to in the New Testament, especially in Matthew's Gospel. Two examples will show how important some of these texts are to New Testament writers and to all subsequent Christian

writers. The following text from Isaiah is quoted by all four evangelists as a prophecy of the ministry of John the Baptist:

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low,  
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it  
together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isa. 40:3-5)

The Gospels and Paul's Letters both emphasized that Christ was a direct descendant of King David. The expectation of a savior coming from the House of David is predicted by several prophets, including Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." (Jer. 23:5-6)

The final category of Hebrew Scripture is called the Writings, a collection of texts that provide models of conduct, advice, edifying stories, and magnificent poetry. Old Testament literary works were favorite sources of wisdom in the Middle Ages and were frequently commented upon by medieval writers. Included among these texts is the book of Job, a long narrative poem about a good man who lost all his earthly possessions in a test of his faith. Job was frequently seen as an anticipation of Christ in the Middle Ages, thanks largely to the long Commentary on the Book of Job written by Pope Gregory I (d. 604). He was also, like several other Old Testament figures, regarded as a saint in the Middle Ages, and churches were even dedicated to him. The Writings also include what was perhaps the best-loved and most pervasive book of the Old Testament in the Middle Ages, the Psalms, the Hebrew hymnbook, a series of 150 songs that were believed to have been written by King David. These songs express the widest variety of moods and attitudes, ranging from laments to hymns of praise, from battle songs to wedding songs. Some sing of the love of the faithful for God while others cry out for the annihilation of their enemies. For example, one can contrast the two texts below:

Happy indeed is the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked; nor lingers in the way of sinners nor sits in the company of scorners, but whose delight is the law of the Lord and who ponders his law day and night. (Ps. 1:1-2)

O God, break the teeth in their mouths, tear out the fangs of these wild beasts,  
O Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away: let them wither like grass

that is trodden underfoot: let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime: like a woman's miscarriage that never sees the sun. (Ps. 57:7-9)

The Rule of Saint Benedict (c. 530) prescribed that the entire Psalter was to be sung in monastic churches each week, and in cathedrals and parish churches the Psalms were also sung regularly.

The books of Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, and Proverbs were all thought to have been written by King Solomon and, together with Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach), were seen to be thematically connected to the idea of wisdom in its many manifestations, including wisdom as the manifestation of the creative power of God, personified in both Proverbs and Wisdom as a woman:

She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.

I loved her and sought her from my youth;

I desired to take her for my bride,

And became enamored of her beauty. (Wisdom 8:1-2)

The beginning of the Wisdom of Solomon—"Love justice you who rule the earth"—is quoted in Dante's *Paradiso* and is emblazoned on a scroll in the hands of Jesus in a fresco (1315) in the principal meeting chamber of Siena's city hall. In Ecclesiasticus there is a brief summary, a highlights reel of the heroes of Hebrew history, that was often used in the Middle Ages as a way of teaching Christians the essentials of the Hebrew past. Wisdom literature also included practical advice. A few examples from the book of Proverbs will illustrate the richness and variety of advice to be found there:

Like a dog that returns to its own vomit, is a fool who reverts to his folly. (26:11)

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring. (27:1)

The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by a neglected child. (29:15)

These and hundreds of other bits of wisdom provided both practical guides to daily living and important philosophical principles in the Middle Ages. Within this grouping of wisdom literature we should also mention the Song of Songs because it, too, was considered to have been written by Solomon. A poem charged with sexual imagery that celebrates the physical relationship between a bride and a bridegroom, the Song of Songs was one of the most commented-upon books of the Bible in the Middle Ages, most frequently treated allegorically, with Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as his bride.

It is important to say something about form as well as content in the Old Testament, since the vivid imagery of the Hebrew writers permeates the

Middle Ages. They did not speak in abstractions, but rather their language was almost invariably concrete and specific. They spoke in quite precise and detailed metaphor, as in the following Psalm:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High and abides in the shade of the Almighty says to the Lord: "My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust."

It is he who will free you from the snare of the fowler who seeks to destroy you; he will conceal you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge.

You will not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that prowls in the darkness nor the scourge that lays waste at noon.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand fall at your right, you, it will never approach; his faithfulness is buckler and shield.

Your eyes have only to look to see how the wicked are repaid, you who have said: "Lord, my refuge!" and have made the Most High your dwelling.

Upon you no evil shall fall, no plague approach where you dwell. For you has he commanded his angels, to keep you in all your ways.

They shall bear you upon their hands lest you strike your foot against a stone. On the lion and the viper you will tread and trample the young lion and the dragon.

Since he clings to me in love, I will free him; protect him for he knows my name.

When he calls I shall answer: "I am with you." I will save him in distress and give him glory.

With length of life I will content him;

I shall let him see my saving power. (Ps. 90 [91 in modern versions])

God is personal and concrete: "My stronghold," "his wings," and so on. Furthermore, the descriptions of God's power are specific. God will rescue a man from hurting his foot on a stone, which in biblical times could mean not being able to farm or harvest, and thus possibly starvation. This same passage is used by the devil in Matt. 4:6 and Luke 4:11 to tempt Christ. Texts like this were often used in medieval art, such as the statues of Christ standing on a lion and a viper, symbolizing enemies of the Church. This psalm was one of the best known in the Middle Ages, since the Rule of Saint Benedict prescribed its singing every day at the office of compline.

The second part of the Christian Bible, the New Testament, is much shorter than the Old Testament, much less varied in its literary forms, and written within a much shorter span of time, less than a hundred years. It consists of four Gospels; the Acts of the Apostles, an account of the early Church; thirteen letters attributed to Paul; the anonymous letter to the Hebrews, also believed in the Middle Ages to have been written by Paul; letters attributed to James, Peter, John, and Jude; and the Apocalypse or book of Revelation.

The Gospels are the most familiar part of the New Testament because they contain the stories of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. However, these accounts are not biographies in the modern sense. The Gospels present highly theologized pictures of Christ; their authors are more interested in presenting their audience with the "good news" of Jesus than a chronicle of his activities. The Gospels are conventionally divided into two groups: the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John. In fact, there are crucial similarities among all four Gospels. All four present as their central concern the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. And in all four the crucifixion and resurrection come at the end of the narrative, as its climax and focal point. Nonetheless, the division is useful. The synoptic Gospels, of which Mark is the earliest (c. 70 C.E.), share many stories that are not present in John. They have basically the same chronology of events; they describe the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist; in them Christ often speaks in parables. Nonetheless, there are also differences among them; for example, Mark has no nativity account. Matthew and Luke each describe Christ's birth, although with some significant differences between them. Each presents its own perspective on the meaning of Christ's life and teachings.



*Sculpture from the south porch of Chartres Cathedral. Thirteenth century. This statue puts into stone the image of Christ trampling the lion and dragon from Psalm 91. When this sculpture was made, the lion was probably understood to represent the ferocity of the pagans (i.e., Muslims) while the dragon suggested the cleverness of heretics.*



Matthew is the Gospel of fulfillment. Quoting the Old Testament almost a hundred times, it constantly emphasizes how Christ fulfills and completes the revelation of God in the Old Testament. All the evangelists develop this theme somewhat, but Matthew far exceeds the others. Consider the following passages from the nativity narrative, which draw energetically from the figure of Joseph in Genesis, as well as from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." [quoting Isa. 7:14] (1:18–23)

...Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." [quoting Hos. 11:1] (2:14–15)

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." [quoting Jer. 31:15] (2:16–18)

Perhaps this theme of fulfillment can best be summarized by a text from the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I have come to set aside the law and the prophets; I have not come to set them aside, but to bring them to perfection" (5:17).

Luke, who was probably the best educated of the evangelists and best acquainted with the way the Greeks wrote history, gives a particularly beautiful literary work. Some principal themes are the universal message of Christ—Matthew by contrast was writing primarily for Jewish Christians—the exaltation of the lowly and poor, the importance of Mary, and the significance of Christ as a man of prayer and solitude. In his nativity narrative, Luke stresses the universal message of Christ in a song attributed to the prophet Simeon:



"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (2:29-32)

The exaltation of the poor and the importance of Mary are both present in the song of Mary:

And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promises he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (1:46-55)

Luke also emphasizes repentance and forgiveness, illustrated by such stories as those of the Prodigal Son and the repentant thief who was crucified with Christ.

John's Gospel is different from the other three. It does not rely on parables as the other Gospels do. Rather, Christ speaks in a more sophisticated and philosophical way. Furthermore, the chronology differs from that in the synoptic Gospels. For example, Christ is crucified on the Passover in John and thus is identified with the sacrificial lamb of Exodus 12 while in the synoptics it is the Last Supper that takes place on the Passover and the crucifixion is the day afterward. There are several important themes in John, two of which appear in the opening verses. Christ is associated with light, and Christ is called the Word, who is shown to have been active in the works of creation. In fact, John's prologue can be read as a commentary on and update of the creation stories in Genesis:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (1:1-5)

Christ's identification with the paschal victim (the lamb sacrificed in commemoration of God's plague "passing over" the Hebrews when they were in Egypt) is clear in John:

The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29)

According to John, Jesus' legs are not broken at the crucifixion, thus fulfilling a text in Leviticus that said that no bone of the paschal lamb was to be broken.

John's only parable is of Christ as the Good Shepherd, identifying Christ with the Messiah described by the prophets. This text, along with a different Good Shepherd parable in Matthew and Luke, is the source for early representations in art of Christ as the Good Shepherd as well as representations in later medieval literature.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep." (10:11–15)

John carefully distinguishes between the letter and the spirit as the key to understanding Jesus. In fact, one of the literary devices John employs is to have the Pharisees and even sometimes Jesus' friends take his spiritual pronouncements literally. The famous "bread of life" passage illustrates the Johannine distinction between the letter, which is temporal, and the spirit, which is eternal. Christ has just fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, and the crowds have followed him:

So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe in you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." (6:30–39)

"Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not

die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (6:47-52)

All four Gospels have in common some special place among Jesus' followers for Peter. Three passages in particular became important to the Middle Ages, since the popes were understood to be the successors of Peter and based their claims to power on Christ's words to Peter:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:13-19)

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32)

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these [others do]?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-18)

The Acts of the Apostles, attributed to Luke, is a continuation of his Gospel, beginning with the Ascension of Christ to heaven and then narrating important events in the first years of the Church. It tells of the Christian community in Jerusalem after Christ's earthly ministry; the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen; the conversion of Paul; the missions of Paul to the Gentiles; and the establishment of Gentile (non-Jewish) Christianity. One of the most important stories in Acts is that of Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them

were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

It can be argued that as Luke's Gospel is the story of God the Son, Acts is the story of God the Holy Spirit, having come at Pentecost to guide the early Church.

In some ways the Letters of Paul are the most important part of the New Testament for the Middle Ages. The Greek word for letter is "epistle," which is how Paul's letters are often designated, especially in older translations. Although several letters traditionally ascribed to Paul are today regarded as works of his followers by many biblical scholars, medieval thinkers made no distinctions of authorship, nor did they doubt the complete consistency of the ideas expressed in the corpus of letters bearing his name. While the Gospels provided most of the stories and images for medieval art, Paul provided the basis for the development of Christian theology. Augustine, clearly the most influential theologian for the Middle Ages and beyond, was especially reliant on him. Paul had been a rigid, legalistic Jew—a Pharisee—who persecuted early Christians; he had looked on approvingly at the stoning of Stephen. However, according to Acts of the Apostles, he underwent a miraculous conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus, the model for later conversion stories (e.g., Antony and Augustine):

Meanwhile Saul [Paul], still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from Heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (Acts 9:1-7)

Paul soon saw his mission as preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to non-Jews, and he spent years traveling primarily in the eastern Mediterranean, establishing Christian communities and later writing them letters. He is believed to have died in the persecution of Nero in Rome, which began after the fire of 64 C.E.

Paul stresses the necessity of faith; this emphasis becomes a key to medieval theology. The following text from Paul's letter to the Romans makes the primacy of faith clear:

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then

overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Rom. 3:27-31)

Although Paul never suggests that human knowledge is of no value, the proper purpose of study and reflection is to lead a person to God:

For what can be known about God is plain to them [the Gentiles], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Rom. 1:19-20)

For medieval theories of art, literature, music, science, and knowledge in general, there is no more important scriptural passage than this one. Augustine returns to it constantly, and virtually every other great medieval thinker uses it as well.

Paul's deep spirituality is sometimes misunderstood to mean that he rejected as evil worldly things or human flesh. One should consider Paul's own words about the material world and about humanity:

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Rom. 14:14)

A great deal of medieval political theory derives either directly from Paul or indirectly from Paul through Augustine. Paul writes about the necessity for obedience to civil authority in the following influential passage:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. (Rom. 13:1-6)

Even medieval attitudes toward women derived to a great extent from Paul:

But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ.

For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. (1 Cor. 11:7-12)

One should notice not only the subordinate place in which Paul put women, essentially accepting the conventions of his society, but also their new importance within Christianity. It is clear in Paul's letters as well as many other texts from the first Christian centuries that women played central roles in guiding and administering Christian communities. However, the continuing institutionalization of the Church eventually led to a male monopoly, at least in terms of the holding of official positions of authority.

As a Jew, Paul was thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament, and he often uses Old Testament stories in his letters. He sees Old Testament events as foreshadowings of things that occurred in the time of Christ: "That gospel [i.e., good news], promised long ago by means of his prophets in the holy scriptures, tells us of his Son" (Rom. 1:2). This Pauline outlook is absolutely essential to understanding the way medieval people viewed the entire Old Testament ("typology" and "figuralism" are the words most often used to describe this foreshadowing of the New Testament in the Old). In the following text from 1 Corinthians, Paul reads events of the Jews' exodus from Egypt typologically:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. (1 Cor. 10:1-12)

This text shows the typological relationship between the passing through the Red Sea and Christian baptism, as well as between the feeding of the Hebrews in the desert and the Eucharist. Paul sees a primary significance of the Old Testament to be both symbolic and directly relevant to his own time, thus making it an integral part of Christian belief. He does not deny its historical truth but simply believes that this is not always the primary level of

meaning. The following text from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians makes this point clearer:

Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. (4:21-26)

Paul makes one of the most difficult but important connections between the Old and New Testaments in Romans 5. Here he talks of Christ coming as a second Adam to undo the sin of the first:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. (5:12-16)

This image of Christ as the new Adam is a medieval commonplace that can be seen in all facets of medieval culture. In many paintings of the crucifixion, for example, the skull of Adam is at the foot of the cross. The medieval legend of the true cross claims that the cross of Christ was made from the tree planted at the grave of Adam. Thus as that tree represents sin in the world, so did that same tree bring life through the sacrifice of Christ. By the beginning of the Middle Ages, the idea of Mary as the new Eve also had developed. Thus, just as Eve (Eva in Latin) had sinned, so did the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary of "Ave" ("Hail," Eva spelled backward) begin the reversal of human destruction caused by sin.

Of the non-Pauline epistles, only one will be discussed here—the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews. It is important because it deals with the concept of Christ as priest, in particular as perpetual priest in the order of Melchizedek (a priest-king who meets Abraham in Genesis and is mentioned again in Ps. 109:4: "You are a priest forever, a priest like Melchizedek of old").



Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 5:1-10)

This identification of Christ with Melchizedek, both priest and king, allows Melchizedek to become an important prefiguration of Christ in medieval art



*Sculpture in the interior of Reims Cathedral. Thirteenth century. Melchizedek gives bread and wine to Abraham (Gen. 14:18). The physical food that Melchizedek gives to Abraham points toward Christ giving spiritual food to the Church. This representation of the event clearly interprets it as a prefiguration of Holy Communion given by a priest to a knight.*

and the liturgy. Furthermore, Christ as priest and king becomes an important element in the development of theories of spiritual and royal authority.

The last book of the Bible, and to many the most puzzling and difficult, is the book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, as it was called in the Middle Ages. The word "apocalypse" means a "revelation" or an "unveiling" and refers to a type of literature in which heavenly realities are mediated through a human sage. Part of the Old Testament book of Daniel, considered to be one of the four major prophetic books in the Middle Ages, is considered to be an apocalypse by modern scholars and is the source of much of the imagery in the book of Revelation. Relating a series of visions in which the author, believed in the Middle Ages to be the evangelist and apostle John (an attribution not generally accepted today), Revelation describes in a dramatic and highly symbolic way the struggle between good and evil, especially as that struggle is to be played out at the end of time. A sense of both the dramatic and the symbolic quality of Revelation can be seen from the following passage:

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumbling and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. (Rev. 4:1-8)

One thing to notice in this passage is the importance of numbers. Number symbolism is not unique to Revelation in Scripture, but it seems more abundant and more complicated here than anywhere else. Seven is a number of completeness, echoing the days of creation; the twenty-four elders were taken to represent the twelve of the Old (tribes of Israel) and the twelve of the New (the apostles). The description of the four living creatures is a borrowing from chapter 1 of Ezekiel. By the end of the second century, theologians had interpreted them as symbols of the four evangelists, and so it was for the rest of the Middle Ages: Mark the lion, Luke the ox, Matthew the man, and John the eagle.

Another important text for dealing with number symbolism is the opening of the seven seals, one of several places in Revelation where the pattern of

seven is repeated (Rev. 6:1-8:2). Especially from the twelfth century onward, scriptural exegetes interpreted the opening of these seals as the symbolic representation of successive events in the history of the Church from the coming of Christ to the consummation of the world at the Last Judgment. An apocalyptic mentality, that is, a sense of the imminence of the end of the world, frequently accompanied difficult times and cataclysmic events in the Middle Ages, and the influence of the book of Revelation and its interpreters was especially pervasive during those times. As the last book of the Bible, and as a book that frequently borrows from the first book, the book of Genesis, Revelation was also seen as a kind of summary or recapitulation of the entire Bible.

Near the end of Revelation, there is a description of heaven, the New Jerusalem:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (21:9-21)

This description of the heavenly Jerusalem, again illustrating the importance of numbers and the highly symbolic language of the book, is another text that



*Portal sculpture. Church of Saint Trophime, Arles, France. Twelfth Century. Christ is presented in glory, surrounded by the four beasts described in Revelation 4. From the second century on, they were understood to represent the four evangelists, clear here because each one holds a book.*

is frequently depicted in medieval art. No book of the Bible is more frequently represented in art throughout the Middle Ages than the book of Revelation.

The New Testament is not a collection of all early Christian literature but rather a collection of texts that was widely agreed upon only in the fourth century. Thus, there are many "gospels" and "apocalypses" that were written in the first Christian centuries but not included in Scripture; these make up the New Testament Apocrypha. In them are many stories not found in the canonical books of the New Testament that were immensely popular in the Middle Ages, and were important as sources of medieval literature and art. Among the most important works of this type are those that deal with the life of the Virgin Mary and the earliest stories of her Assumption into heaven.

Since the Bible begins at the beginning with the story of creation and ends at the end with the Last Judgment, people in the Middle Ages saw themselves to be actors on the stage of biblical history. They were part of its story. Not surprising, then, that the Bible was seen, as we note in our introduction, as a guide not only to religious life in the Middle Ages but also to such diverse areas as law, art, literature, and music. How that synthesis came about is the subject of subsequent chapters. Our chapter on Augustine, the Bible's most important expositor for the Middle Ages, will explicitly pick up once again the subject of biblical interpretation begun here in the first chapter. But biblical interpretation will also implicitly be a subject in the other chapters, shaping what we say there as well.