

In the Beginning Was the Word

*The Bible in American Public Life,
1492–1783*



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Introduction

THE BIBLE IN American history defines a subject of extraordinary depth and vast complexity. For countless Americans—of high estate and low, slave and free, male and female, red and yellow, black and white—Scripture has opened a doorway to the personal experience of God. To varying degrees for those ones and many others, the Bible has also functioned as a guide to life, sometimes with liberating or comic effects and sometimes with oppressive or tragic results. Scripture has obviously played a dominant role in the organized religious activities of all Christian and Jewish traditions, as well as with variations among Muslims and believers in other sacred texts. As a tangible object, it has been a ubiquitous physical presence—sanctifying all manner of homes, but also focusing rituals, stimulating commerce, distinguishing ethnic communities, naming the landscape, and memorializing stages on life's way. It has made an incalculably large contribution to the construction of culture—in vernacular and elite speech, in political persuasion, in iconic and literary representation, in scholarship, in legal reasoning, and in entertainment. It is no exaggeration to claim that the Bible has been—and by far—the single most widely read text, distributed object, and referenced book in all of American history.

This book about *the Book* examines the public history of America's most comprehensively present "thing" from first European contact through the American War of Independence. It goes almost without saying that a *public* history like this is possible only because of the immense significance of Scripture for *personal* histories. The Bible's message—its dynamic accounts of divine creation, divine judgment, divine mercy, and divine guidance—has been appropriated with many differences in countless variations. Yet because of the power of that message, as both actively embraced and formally recognized, Scripture has featured in public life wherever it has been heard, read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested.

To illustrate, Martin Luther early in the sixteenth century expounded the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians, with its stirring words about standing “fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,” as a thrilling description of personal redemption. Because personal appropriations of this text continued to resonate so powerfully through the generations, it stood ready in the eighteenth century for the Americans who evoked it to condemn plans for an Anglican bishop in the colonies, to attack the institution of slavery, and to promote armed rebellion against king and Parliament.¹ In other words, without ongoing personal engagement, no compelling reason would exist to attempt a public history.

For this particular attempt, three densely connected realities propel the narrative. First, if Roman Catholics introduced the Christian Scriptures to the Americas, including areas now in the United States, Protestants, professing to follow the Bible above all other authorities, dominated this early history and dominated it overwhelmingly. Although the history of Scripture in the United States even after 1776 rested on that strongly Protestant legacy, Catholics, Jews, and adherents of other holy books eventually contributed significantly to what became an ecumenically Christian and then an actively interfaith story. But the colonial history of Scripture unfolded, with very few exceptions, as a Protestant history where Protestants perceived those with other convictions about the Bible or with loyalty to other sacred texts as enemies. A primary goal of this study is to show what it meant—positively, negatively, ironically, often inadvertently—for Protestants to claim that they followed the Scripture above all other human authorities.

The second and third matters give this history its plot, as well as its contemporary relevance. The Bible occupied a central place in Protestantism because it served so well to attack the devastating errors Protestants perceived in Roman Catholicism and also because it could guide their own efforts to live as Christian believers. But—the second reality—Protestants always differed considerably among themselves concerning *how* Scripture served as a guide. Was it the primary guide? The one essential guide? The crucial guide? Or the only guide? Protestants in colonial America held all of these positions, and more. Yet attempts to live by “the Bible alone” (as the only guide) enjoyed greater currency in the colonies than in any part of Europe. This attempt—which I define as “biblicism” later in this introduction—keyed especially significant developments in American life, from the seventeenth-century Puritans who established Holy Commonwealths in New England through the eighteenth-century revivalists who proclaimed scriptural truths as bringing

personal redemption to disputants in the Revolutionary era who argued about the legitimacy of slavery. Although far from the only approach to Scripture, trust in “the Bible alone” emerged by the end of the eighteenth century as one of the most important colonial legacies to the new nation. As this book’s underlying second theme, I try to explain why that particular view became more powerful in the colonies than in Britain, how it related to other stances on Scripture, and what legacy these colonial developments bequeathed to the later history of the United States.

The third reality was the assumption of Christendom (also defined later) that settlers brought to the New World. Apart from a few radicals in Europe, almost all Protestants from their origin in the early sixteenth century took for granted that societies existed as organic unities. In this belief they stood with their Roman Catholic contemporaries. Since a Supreme Deity actually existed and had communicated his will by revelation to humankind, all human life should be organized in response to that revelation. To some degree before the Reformation and much more intensely after it began, Europeans differed on *how* God revealed his will and over *what* that will entailed. But the assumption of a unified social-political-cultural whole prevailed so widely that those who questioned it looked more like seditious maniacs than principled dissenters.

Christendom, too, came with European settlers to the New World. Yet because of the diversity of colonial settlements as well as the space that America opened for innovation, assumptions about Christendom eventually changed and, in some cases, drastically so. Because the Bible had always functioned as a crucial factor in those assumptions, the new-world history of Scripture and the new-world history of Christendom moved in lockstep together. The most complicated aspect of this colonial history is the way that trust in the Bible could both strengthen and weaken the Christendom heritage. Over the course of the eighteenth century, recourse to Scripture fueled rejection of church-state establishments, the most important institutional structure of Christendom. At the same time, deepened attachment to Scripture heightened the feeling that all of life required divine direction from the Bible, which allowed for what might be called “informal Christendom” to continue even when Americans rejected church-state establishments. Europeans have never fathomed this distinction between institutional and informal Christendom. But that distinction, with Scripture as key for its emergence, became a central feature of late-colonial life and exerted a tremendous influence on later American history.²

With this book on Protestant trust in the Bible, particular attitudes toward scriptural authority, and the new-world history of Christendom, I hope to explore questions especially relevant for those who, as the Scriptures might say, have eyes to see. For Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, as well as Jews and others who believe that a deity or deities actually communicate with human beings, this book can provide an instructive tale. Their religions have a place for Scripture, but not exclusively central in Protestant fashion. Colonial Protestants, with their particularly strong reliance on Scripture, did many things that strengthened their own faith and made them a blessing to society at large. Just as certainly they did other things that harmed themselves and created havoc for all. Attending to the whys and wherefores of what went right and what went wrong in Protestant attachment to Scripture should provide other kinds of believers with examples of what they might imitate and what they should at all costs avoid in living by their own understanding of divine revelation.

For Protestants in the contemporary United States who (like myself) continue to regard the Bible as definitive divine revelation, I hope the book can serve as a cautionary tale. Its narrative treats both the positive life-transforming power of Scripture along with a host of destructive or delusory results manifest among those who believed in that power. Active trust in “the Bible alone,” or in Scripture more generally, guaranteed social influence; it did not guarantee positive benefits for that influence in society.

For those with no interest or belief in divine revelation, I hope the book can illuminate aspects of the American past that for good and ill continue to bear on the present. Standards of secular morality differ as much as standards based on divine revelation, but those standards will be applied with more knowledge, insight, and perhaps empathy if they are informed by fuller historical understanding.

Public Life

The pages that follow concentrate on the Bible in *politics* and the Bible for *empire* or *nation*—that is, Scripture in the sphere of coercive power defined, defended, or contested—as well as for the processes by which political units create or articulate their own identities. *In the Beginning Was the Word* does draw freely on an inexhaustible record documenting how the Bible has been appropriated by individuals, put to use by religious institutions, found expression in other social institutions, and contributed to the

meanings that make up culture. But the purpose throughout is to show how such influences shaped the history of Scripture for political, imperial, and national purposes.

As should be obvious already, the chapters in this book are pointing toward a consideration of the Bible's public history in the later United States. My hope is soon to publish an account that traces the rise and gradual decline of a "Bible civilization" in the United States' long nineteenth century. Yet that later history rests so firmly on what went before that it cannot be properly understood without reasonably full attention to developments in Europe and America before the United States came into existence.

The later history from the American Revolution through the First World War involved the continuing effort by sectarian evangelical Protestants to reestablish an "informal Christendom" even after they had helped dismantle church-state established religion. By the 1830s this informal Christendom had come to exert great influence on the nation as a whole, but then it wavered when confronted with the crises that led to the Civil War; thereafter it declined further by fits and starts through the fifty years leading up to World War I. Over the same years, the biblicist approach first came close to dominating Protestant circles, but then it too wavered. Irreconcilable quarrels among Protestants, especially over what Scripture taught concerning slavery, sped its decline, but so also did success by Catholics, Jews, and some with no interest in religion who contested the dominance of Protestant mores.

This later United States history—with the Bible as a forceful but constantly contested influence—did not emerge *ex nihilo*. It unfolded, instead, as the latest stage in a rich history with origins deep in the ancient Mediterranean world, redirected during the first Protestant centuries, and strongly influenced by crises in British history under the Tudors, Stuarts, and Hanoverians that provided the default cultural patterns for the American colonies. In this much longer history, the embeddedness of Scripture within Christendom was absolutely central.

Christendom, Protestantism, and the Bible

Christendom represented an ideal of civilization marked by the thorough intermingling of religion with everything else. As defined succinctly by the historian Hugh McLeod, it meant "a society where there are close ties between leaders of the church and secular elites; where the laws purport

to be based on Christian principles; where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, everyone is assumed to be Christian; and where Christianity provides a common language, shared alike by the devout and the religiously lukewarm.”³

A plethora of signal moments defined the possible variations of secular and religious authority within Christendom: from the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century beginning to support the Christian churches or Charlemagne on Christmas Day in the year 800 reluctantly accepting the crown of the Holy Roman Empire from Pope Leo III; through Martin Luther protected by his prince, Frederick of Saxony, after his published opinions discredited him with pope and emperor, and John Calvin advising the Geneva city councils on the mode of execution for Michael Servetus (sentenced to death for his religious opinions); to the sponsorship of overseas Christian missions by first Catholic powers (Portugal, Spain, France) and then by Protestants (Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain, Germany)—to the blunt prescription attributed to Denis Diderot sometime late in the *ancien regime* of France that “men will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” However much the balance of power shifted back and forth between what we today call “church” and “state,” behind the variable disposition of those realms lay a nearly universal conviction: existence, under God, must be visibly unified, whatever the exact configuration of that unity.

Integral to Christendom was, naturally, Christianity, and integral to Christianity was the Bible. From the emergence of Christendom in the late-Roman and early medieval eras, implicit, foundational trust in Scripture remained a constant. In the late fourth century, a noted Roman rhetorician and recent Christian convert penned a testimony to Scripture that became as influential as it was typical. The following passage from *The Confessions* of St. Augustine deserves extensive quotation since it reflects something of the exalted regard for the Bible that informed much of Western history:

So, since we were too weak to discover truth by pure reason and therefore needed the authority of Holy Writ, I now began to believe that you could not possibly have given such supreme authority to these Scriptures all over the world, unless it had been your wish that by means of them men should both believe in you and seek after you. . . . In fact, the authority of Scripture seemed to me the more venerable and the more worthy of religious faith because,

while it was easy to read for everybody, it also preserved in the more profound sense of its meaning the majesty of something secret; it offers itself to all in plain words and a very simple style of speech, yet serious thinkers have to give it their closest attention. Thus its arms are wide open to receive everyone.⁴

Yet if Christendom was unimaginable without the powerful presence of Scripture, so also did Christendom shape the imagination of those who heard the Bible and acted upon its precepts. The well-established practices of Western Christian society cut the channels in which biblical usage flowed. So deep did those channels become that the Bible's central place in the terrain of Christendom could usually be taken simply for granted. Indeed, through most of the centuries from ca. 350 to ca. 1520, while the Bible remained an essential foundation, it was a foundation obscured by the public edifices built upon it. Some of those edifices were physical, like churches constructed by princes and municipalities where entire communities joined to worship God. Other edifices were conceptual, like the interpretive conventions taught in churches, monasteries, and eventually universities that governed how believers looked to the Scriptures for moral, social, and theological direction.

The taken-for-granted status of Scripture as indispensable deep structure for Christendom explains much about the very earliest career of the Bible in America. As sketched in the Prelude, that history was well underway before the rise of Protestantism complicated the story. For American history, "in the beginning" the Word was in Spanish, Latin, and native languages like Nahuatl—and no one paid much attention to the Bible as a principle in its own right. Yet for Catholic figures like Christopher Columbus or Bartholomé de las Casas, the Bible figured as centrally as for almost any later Protestant, only not as a contested object.

With the rise of Protestantism, Scripture emerged from the shadows. When Protestants attempted to rebuild the superstructures of Christendom, biblical foundations were exposed for contentious scrutiny. The controversies of the sixteenth century are the subject of chapter 1; their bequest shaped the story narrated in the rest of this book and the second volume to come on the United States' nineteenth century. After the Reformation, the long history of Protestant-Catholic strife would be defined by two first-order questions: How could humans be reconciled to God? How could we know?

The most important early leaders of the Protestant Reformation challenged neither Christendom nor Christianity's traditional deference to Scripture. They did challenge what they took to be the corrupt, enervating, hypocritical, distorted, simoniacal, neglectful, and completely indefensible abuse of Scripture in the Roman Catholic Church. That challenge concentrated on what in their eyes had become the inadequate honoring, teaching, preaching, application, and simple understanding of the Bible. In carrying out this challenge, they raised into self-consciousness what had been mostly conventional opinion about the centrality of Scripture for personal Christian existence and corporate Christian civilization.

Significantly for what came later in America, Protestant efforts to recover Scripture's true meaning and, thereby, restore Christianity to Christendom spun off two radical notions that later made a real difference. One of these notions raised the banner of biblicism. The other proclaimed the hitherto unimaginable possibility that the Bible might oppose Christendom.

Biblicism and the Protestant Trust in Scripture

As used in this book, "biblicism" means an effort to follow "the Bible alone"—absent or strongly subordinating other authorities—as the path of life with and for God. The word seems to have been used first by John Sterling, a Scottish friend of Thomas Carlyle, who applied it to the English Puritans of the seventeenth century. In 1843, Sterling made a chronological observation to Carlyle about the latter's plan to write a book on Oliver Cromwell. Sterling wrote that by the seventeenth century, the Royalists who supported King Charles I had already degenerated into a complacent "Squirism"—by contrast to the energy and dedication of the Puritans. In framing this comparison he coined the word: "One must go back to the Middle Ages to see Squirism as rampant and vivacious as Biblicism was in the Seventeenth Century."⁵ He was referring to the Puritans' ardent profession to follow only the Scriptures as they pushed for further reforms of the English state-church establishment.⁶

I am using "biblicism" in this sense, but with more emphasis on the word's critical function than implied by Sterling. In his history of American fundamentalism, George Marsden emphasized that function, while specifying an important American chronology: "This Biblicism, strong among the Puritans, gained new significance in the early nineteenth century. . . . The true church should set aside all intervening tradition, and return

to the purity of New Testament practice. The Bible alone should be one's guide."⁷

Historians have rightly linked biblicism with another abstract noun—primitivism, or the desire to shrug off the accumulated detritus of the centuries in order to recover pure Christianity as experienced by the very first believers.⁸ Protestants in general rehabilitated the reputation of medieval reformers who had complained about the Catholic Church's drift away from earlier and purer Christian standards. Among English Protestants a particularly strong primitivist critique carried over from attacks on Rome to prescriptions aimed at reforming English church life. That strand, in turn, contributed much to American settlements in New England and has ever since been periodically revived by American critics disgusted by official corruption and visionaries longing for the New Jerusalem.

In the Beginning Was the Word concentrates on what it meant for biblicism to arise as a powerful force in England during the second half of the sixteenth century, to flourish there into the middle of the next century, only then to recede—though for different reasons and with quite different effects in the mother country and the colonies. The heart of the book features developments during the mid- to late-eighteenth century that led to a resurgence of this approach in the colonies. Those developments included a powerful appeal to the Bible by revivalists as well as a shift in political ideology that led colonists to view hereditary or aristocratic authority as purest evil. Only the Bible—and often in the form of “the Bible alone”—survived the Revolution's assault on old-world traditions.⁹

From the late 1510s, almost all Protestants sounded like biblicists when they addressed corruptions they perceived in the Catholic church. As with so much else, Martin Luther created the mold when at the very inception of the Reformation he took his stand against pope and emperor—against, that is, the weight of European Christendom—on the Bible alone (chapter 1). That note then reappeared consistently in Protestant history, perhaps most memorably in a famous sentence from a polemical tract published in 1638: “The BIBLE, I say, THE BIBLE only is the Religion of Protestants!”¹⁰ (The ironical context of that statement is explored in chap. 3).

Yet for Luther, as also for most Protestants in the sixteenth century and since, biblicism served a polemical purpose more than it functioned as a practical guide. Reliance on *sola scriptura*, or “the Bible alone,” worked well as a weapon of criticism wielded to draw Christendom back to Christ.

For church reform, social renewal, or the practices of piety, however, things became more complicated. From the beginning, recourse to Scripture operated on a spectrum where Protestants accepted different complements from outside the text itself. On the biblicist end of the spectrum stood those who in principle questioned any authority except the Bible, or that the Bible directly sanctioned. On the other end stood those who viewed the Bible's supreme authority as perfectly compatible with other authorities that did not contradict Scripture. "Directly sanction" as opposed to "not contradict" sounds like a small difference, but that distinction has produced a great array of intra-Protestant disputation.

As we observe in chapters 2 and 3, the main English Protestant confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both articulated principles of supreme biblical authority and specified several appropriate secondary authorities. The Protestants who promoted these confessions were, thus, trying to be biblical, but they were not biblicists as I am defining that word.

Efforts to secure the Bible as an ultimate standard were also complicated because of implicit authorities that functioned alongside those that Europeans explicitly acknowledged. Authorities beneath the level of consciousness have played a role in all religious movements—indeed, in all human contexts. Among Protestants bent on following Scripture wherever it led, those implicit extratextual influences could be personal—for example, deference to a charismatic leader like Martin Luther or John Calvin, whose teaching became the sole possible interpretation of Scripture for those who trusted the leader's guidance. More commonly, implicit authority came from mental habits absorbed unselfconsciously. What the surrounding culture took for granted about accepted ideals of organization, conventions of interpretation (i.e., hermeneutical assumptions), and commonplace attitudes toward self or the ideal life influenced Protestant appropriation of Scripture—as similar habits have informed all humans in all settings, including the efforts of historians. The presence of implicit authorities complicates the history of the Bible among Protestants because such authorities exerted their influence at every point on the spectrum—from those who claimed to follow the Bible *only* to those who willingly accepted secondary authorities, and with many variations in between.

Examples abound. Biblicists and other Protestants often came to treat the King James Version of the Scriptures as simply "the Bible" with entire confidence that this particular translation represented the plenitude of

biblical revelation. Some nonbiblicists took for granted that the conclusions of a Protestant standard like the Westminster Confession (1646) could interpret Scripture with absolute finality—despite what the Confession explicitly stated about the unique status of the sacred text. Even more widespread became the assumption that the application of a “proof text” could secure unambiguous divine sanction for a particular point of dogma or a particular action in church or society—with no apparent awareness that when Bible users cited chapter and verse by number (e.g., Gn 3:15; Mt 28:16; Rom 3:23), they employed a culturally particular way of dividing up the flow of biblical narratives that came not from the original texts but from much later editorial work. The verse divisions of sacred Scripture, and hence much use of Scripture so divided, in reality reflected human actions with no claim to inspiration by the Holy Spirit (chap. 2).

In the pages that follow I try to sort out the interplay of authorities in several intersecting planes—appeals to the Bible versus other authorities, claims and counterclaims evoking Scripture with equal fervor, controversy usually stimulated by biblicists over which secondary authorities should be allowed to stand alongside Scripture, and even deeper controversy occasioned by the operation of presupposed authorities.

Heartfelt debates over the interpretation of Scripture did not begin in the sixteenth century. Yet the rise of Protestantism manifestly expanded the scope and deepened the intensity of those debates. The precipitating spark for that expansion and intensification was everywhere the Protestant drive to purify the corruptions of Catholicism by appeal to Holy Scripture. To repeat, all Protestants sounded like biblicists when they focused on Catholic errors. Yet the Protestants who maintained biblicist principles when they turned to the restoration (or the abolition) of Christendom made the strongest appeals with the most far-reaching effects. A main purpose of this book is to show why those appeals became stronger in the colonies than in Britain, especially in the decades after 1740 that would shape cultural instincts for the new nation.

The Bible and Christendom: Protestant Variations

From within Protestantism came a second radical idea that had been all but unthinkable for at least a millennium before 1520. It was the conviction that faithfulness to Scripture demanded *opposition* to Christendom. This revolutionary idea arose when radicals transformed the biblicism with which other Protestants attacked Rome into a principle of their own

for guiding Christian life. They asked, as a first instance: Where in Scripture could a specific warrant be found for the time-honored practice of baptizing infants? Once that question emerged, others followed almost immediately: Biblical warrant for paying taxes leveled by the state to support the church? Biblical warrant for going to war at the command of government? Biblical warrant for coercive discipline of citizens thought to have violated church teachings? The Anabaptists aggressively troubled Europe with such persistent questions. For their pains, the governments of Western Christendom, Catholic and Protestant alike, subjected them to imprisonment, exile, and execution. If Anabaptists were condemned as heretics for their beliefs, the more serious crime was their seditious folly of rejecting Christendom.

Protestantism began with a strong point of agreement: recovering the true message of Scripture was the essential first task for repairing the great damage done to Christianity by the Catholic church. Yet from early in the Reformation, three Protestant stances existed with respect to the Bible and Christendom. The first and most common appeared among those who believed that a clarified understanding of Scripture would restore the spiritual integrity and public virtue of Christendom. Early Protestant leaders have been called “magisterial reformers” (from “magister,” or teacher) because they sought to bring Christendom back to its godly purposes through the restoration of proper biblical teaching. Their efforts contributed to the creation of “confessional states” that, along with contemporary Catholic counterparts, divided Europe into locally specific mini-Christendoms.¹¹ While the magisterial Protestants might have spoken like biblicists in attacking Rome, they did not carry out their work of restitution on the basis of the Bible alone. In America, the colonies with the strongest Anglican presence, especially Virginia, exemplified this stance. Their white citizens would long view the Bible as belonging to Christendom, and Christendom as the only proper frame for the Bible.

A second and opposing variation came from the Anabaptists, as well as other radicals who thought that the recovery of biblical Christianity demanded the abandonment of Christendom. When the leaders of Protestant confessional states censured their proposals for reform, these upstarts responded with words their Protestant opponents had thrown at Catholics about the need to follow only God’s written word. To be sure, not all radicals were biblicists, for some believed they could receive divine revelation directly from the Holy Spirit without the mediation of a sacred book.¹² Nonetheless, the driving force behind radical Protestant attacks

against organized Christendom came from the appeal to Scripture as a unique *and comprehensive* authority.

In a political Europe that was soon divided into competing confessional states, the radicals enjoyed scant opportunity to show what a post-Christendom society might look like. Instead, Bible-based protests against Christendom sustained a precarious existence on the European margins. They were also marginal in seventeenth-century colonial America. Biblicist principles did inspire the maverick Roger Williams when he protested against the Puritan Christendom of New England (chap. 5). Williams hoped his new colony, Rhode Island, would allow other biblicists to join him in displaying a better way, but most observers in Britain and America, when they noticed Rhode Island at all, considered it a byword for moral and social chaos.

Somewhat later, William Penn relied on a moderate biblicism to create a colony that moved beyond Christendom less aggressively than did Rhode Island (also chap. 5). Penn's experiment became more significant than Williams's, especially when it proved attractive to his fellow Quakers, who tried to make the colony into a "peaceable kingdom," and also to European sectarians whom authorities had hounded for not conforming to Christendom rules. Yet well into the eighteenth century, the most typical Christian movements transplanted to North America rejected the way Scripture was used in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania as whimsical, dangerous, or berserk.

Representatives of another Protestant variation tried for a third way that is now harder to grasp. They continued to take Christendom for granted even as they proposed to reform it by using Scripture in biblicist or nearly biblicist fashion. Protestants of this sort stood with the magisterial reformers in seeking a Christian commonwealth, but with the Anabaptists in using biblical authority as a principle of criticism against other Protestants. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 1558–1603, Protestants who believed that England remained mired in an incomplete reform, continued to push for change dictated by their strict adherence to Scripture. To advance these efforts at purifying church and nation, they returned repeatedly to the Bible as the first principle. Scripture alone—the biblicist formula—was their battle cry. From the 1570s on, the desire to burn away dross intensified in direct proportion to resistance from the regime. Elizabeth—then King James I (1603–25) and his son Charles I (1625–42/49)—maintained a moderately Protestant path, but one guided at every step by imperatives of state craft and dynastic security. From

reformers came a predictable response: ever more strident appeals to the Bible alone.

As tensions continued to build under Elizabeth, James, and Charles, a few reformers gave up on nationwide reform and, functionally if not always explicitly, gave up also on Christendom; they took the pilgrim path from England to the Netherlands, back to England, and then on to the Plymouth Colony in America. A larger number of reformers continued to uphold an ideal of Christendom reformed by the Word of God but gave up on England; they set out to the New World in order to establish what they could not accomplish in the Old. These Puritans founded the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Haven.

In England, even more reformers held out, giving up neither on the mother country nor on Christendom. They eventually joined the Parliamentary forces offended by the actions of Charles I. After the warfare that broke out in 1640 led to the victory of Parliamentary-Puritan forces, many of these English reformers tried to refashion the church and nation on biblicist or near-biblicist terms. As a consequence with great significance for the future, they failed in that attempt. Disagreements within the Puritan-Parliamentary coalition over what the Bible required posed a first irremediable dilemma, and then in 1660 an exhausted nation welcomed back the monarchy along with its Anglican establishment. Thereafter the Bible still remained very much alive in England. Yet as an important difference with the colonies, the biblicist approach to communitywide reform did not. After the English Glorious Revolution of 1689, Parliament under the monarchs William and Mary legislated a measure of toleration for Bible believers who denounced Christendom and for biblicists disillusioned by the Anglican establishment. But the influence—especially the political influence—of the small minorities holding these two radical positions remained severely limited.

The Bible in the Colonies

In the colonies it was a different story. For New England, biblicist efforts to establish a thoroughly reformed Commonwealth seemed to succeed for thirty years or more. But from about 1660, while never dramatically quashed as in England, the biblicism of the Bible Commonwealths did begin to fade. Eventually, for reasons spelled out in chapters 6, 9, 10, and 11, colonists mostly came to use the Bible in public life as regulated by what could be called (after the union with Scotland in 1707) British imperial Christendom.

In the century between 1660 and 1760, Scripture remained a pervasive presence in the colonies, even as biblicist rhetoric gradually faded. New England's biblicist Christendom, Pennsylvania's post-Christendom Christianity, and the South's Anglican Christendom carried on, but all were increasingly drawn into the mother country's web of commerce, imperial struggle, political intrigue, and literary fashion. As explained in chapter 9, when considering most questions about economic life, racial hierarchy, and political principles, the Bible operated in the background as a support, rather than in the foreground as an explicit authority. Colonists also felt the effect of tectonic intellectual movements, designated by historians as the Enlightenment, that began to disaggregate religion from other spheres of life.

Yet historical development was never uncomplicated. As an important difference from Britain, the move in the colonies away from biblicism remained evolutionary, nonviolent, and did not involve a cataclysmic crisis like civil war and a monarchical Restoration. As a result, biblicism was never as thoroughly discredited in the colonies as was the case in England after 1660.

The colonies also experienced countervailing currents. Even as absorption into imperial consciousness weakened appeals to follow "the Bible alone" (for economic, political and some social purposes), Scripture appropriated very much as "the Bible alone" received a substantial boost during the 1730s and 1740s. As explained in chapters 7 and 8, evangelical revivals quickened many individuals spiritually by bringing selected scriptural themes passionately to life; it led also to self-selected communities in which heeding the particulars of Scripture as a guide for personal religious life became an urgent priority. Without questioning allegiance to the Protestant British empire, those riding the crest of evangelical renewal moved back toward biblicist norms, at least for personal and communal purposes. Much the same also characterized those in Britain affected by evangelical revival, only in a context where the biblicist option for society had been eliminated.

As a consequence, by the mid-eighteenth century, the place of Scripture in the American colonies was both narrowing and intensifying. Along with increased ardor for the Bible wherever the religion of evangelical revival took hold—often in expressly biblicist terms—came also a shrinking of the spheres to which even the most active Protestants applied the Scriptures.

The interplay of Bible and empire produced unexpected results. During the middle decades of the eighteenth century, colonial leaders deployed a full range of biblical texts to strengthen loyalty to Britain, always depicted

as Protestant and freedom-loving in opposition to papal and tyrannical France. Yet in the same years—and for the first time—African Americans in substantial numbers responded positively to the Christian message (chap. 8). For this largely un-free population the biblicist or near-biblicist style of the revivalists made many more converts than had responded to earlier efforts at Christianizing the colonies' enslaved black population. Crucially, those early efforts had all presented Christianity to blacks as the religion of Christendom. With only a few exceptions, the colonial representatives of Christendom also assumed the moral legality of black chattel slavery. Revival religion did not usually call slavery into question; yet it did proclaim a biblicist form of faith with scant attention to the inherited structures of British tradition. The complex story of the colonies at mid-century must, therefore, account for the Bible both expanding its influence with a marginal people whom Christendom enslaved and intensifying its support for the British Protestant Christendom responsible for slavery.

Chapters 10 and 11 show how warfare between France and Britain, conflict between Parliament and the colonies, and then the American War of Independence moved the colonists to reject the institutionalized Christendom of the British empire. In a rapid transformation, the mother country's church-state came to be perceived as a deadly example of the malignant power that had brought the colonies to the very brink of enslavement. Given the historical centrality of Scripture in British culture, it was no surprise that American patriots found much support for their convictions in the Bible—as did the smaller number of colonists who remained loyal to the mother country.

As a rhetorical presence, the Bible became even more ubiquitous in Revolutionary America—providing texts for a great array of patriotic (and a few Loyalist) sermons, enlivening the published pamphlets that everywhere proliferated, and seasoning the formal pronouncements of the rebels' governing assemblies. Yet once past well-worn phrases and a mind-set steeped in the moral universe sustained by Bible-reading, it is much harder to discern either patriots or Loyalists seeking direct guidance from the precepts of Scripture. Where earlier in New England and the middle colonies, leaders had self-consciously tried to shape politics and social life with explicit biblical precepts, now political convictions more obviously provided the substance of arguments, though still regularly sanctioned by biblical references and allusions

It is important to remember that throughout the tumultuous changes of the period considered in this book, one Protestant feature remained

rock solid. Firm anti-Catholic convictions always reinforced movement from a general trust in Scripture toward more specific trust in “the Bible alone.” For most Protestants during most of the three centuries from the Diet of Worms (1521) to the final defeat of Napoleon (1815), “Antichrist,” as ably summarized by historian Michael Winship “was a satanic spirit of hatred against all of God’s laws, driven by an insatiable lust for power. . . . The culmination of this rise of the spirit of Antichrist was the Catholic church.”¹³ As the narrative to follow makes clear, that sentiment remained just as firm for Christendom Protestants as for those who hoped the Bible could bring institutional Christendom to an end.

But What Is the Bible?

Although books should be clear about what they are about, that standard poses difficulties for a history of the Bible. The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye once described the contents of Scripture as “a mosaic.” But then he went on to detail the complexity of that mosaic: “a pattern of commandments, aphorisms, epigrams, proverbs, parables, riddles, pericopes, parallel couplets, formulaic phrases, folktales, oracles, epiphanies, *Gattungen*, *Logia*, bits of occasional verse, marginal glosses, legends, snippets from historical documents, laws, letters, sermons, hymns, ecstatic visions, rituals, fables, genealogical lists, and so on almost indefinitely.”¹⁴ Notwithstanding Scripture’s great internal diversity, it remains justifiable for a historical account to speak more generally of “the Bible.” Generations of Americans have in fact consistently used that undifferentiated term as they referred to an abstract ideal, a weapon in disputes, a source of inspiration or guidance, an object of study or meditation, and in many other ways—even when in practice they have been referring to or thinking about only limited portions of the sacred book.¹⁵

For all but a scholarly few, the Bible has not been the texts that first appeared in the ancient Mediterranean world but were translations that others have made of these ancient writings. Bible translations, unlike the original, appear invariably in only one language. From the early sixteenth century, hundreds of translations have rendered all or portions of Scripture into English. Yet one of the strongest justifications for a history of the Bible in America is the fact that the Authorized or King James Version (KJV) of 1611 achieved an overwhelmingly dominant position for almost all public purposes from early in the colonial period until deep into the twentieth century. Because this one version remained so prominent for so long,

histories of alternative translations that sought a place alongside, or aspired to serve as a replacement, reveal much about general attitudes toward Scripture.¹⁶

Speaking casually of “the Bible” also obscures the fact that translated (as well as original-language) Bibles have appeared in a huge variety of physical sizes and shapes.¹⁷ They have been cheap and expensive; bound in all manner of covers and formats; immense and microscopic and all sizes in between; fancy, ornamental, and deliberately reverent as well as plain, unadorned, and intentionally down-home. Each form of published or translated Bible carries a distinct social, economic, educational, gendered, and cultural—as well as religious—connotation.

Yet especially in a more secular age, it is important to remember the primacy of those religious meanings. Bruce Metzger, a veteran New Testament scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary, long served as the chairman of the translation committee of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), a revision of a revision of the King James Bible. When the NRSV first appeared in the late 1980s, Metzger’s introduction explained at length the complex history (linguistic, organizational, academic) that lay behind its publication. Yet he closed his introduction with a reminder pertinent for all who want to chart the course of Scripture in history: “In traditional Judaism and Christianity, the Bible has been more than a historical document to be preserved or a classic of literature to be cherished and admired; it is recognized as the unique record of God’s dealing with people over the ages. . . . The Bible carries its full message, not to those who regard it simply as a noble literary heritage of the past or who wish to use it to enhance political purposes and advance otherwise desirable goals, but to all persons and communities who read it so that they may discern and understand what God is saying to them.”¹⁸ This book mostly sidesteps the main reason why the Bible has been important in American history, which is the claim of its adherents that it tells the truth. However that claim is regarded, it remains beyond question that Scripture has occupied an important place in public life and so deserves to be examined historically, with this-worldly concerns, as I have tried to do.

Protocols and Perspectives

Scholarly and popular writings on the Bible in American history could fill a good-sized library. But even the great quantity of such works comes nowhere near the stupendous array of scriptural references, quotations,

citations, allusions, evocations, disputes, and more found in the primary sources left by all sorts of Americans in all past eras and from all levels of society. In the pages that follow, almost every document, sermon, tract, statement, or treatise that I treat in some detail could be multiplied countless times over. In addition, although the notes (in abbreviated form) document where I have received special insight for particular issues, full documentation for every general or historical assertion would have resulted in an apparatus that swallowed up the narrative. In partial compensation, I have added a bibliography that provides complete bibliographical information for the book's primary sources as well as many of the works that oriented me to a subject that sprawls without limit in almost every direction.

I am fully conscious that this book overflows with quotations of scriptural passages and with much reference to specific biblical texts. What might seem like overexuberant quotation to the point of tedium is deliberate. The citations and quotations reflect a self-conscious strategy that responds to an observation from Perry Miller, one of the great American historians from the first half of the twentieth century. He once wrote that "The Old Testament is truly so omnipresent in the American culture of 1800 or 1820 that historians have as much difficulty taking cognizance of it as of the air people breathed."¹⁹ This very difficulty in focusing on the atmospheric ubiquity of Scripture makes it all the more important to attempt its history. With a changed metaphor, historians have long recognized that ubiquity but have treated it as wallpaper, simply a backdrop for more important objects of attention. This book suggests, by contrast, that Scripture should be viewed as a sturdy piece of furniture smack in the middle of the room. If I as an author, or readers in their perusal, weary of so much quotation, we reflect a basic unwillingness to confront American history as it actually unfolded.

Where authors did not specify the source of their biblical quotations, I have tried to supply those references in brackets. For reasons that will become obvious, all biblical quotations are from the King James Version, except where specified.²⁰ The book also pauses at several points to explain the importance of the verse divisions of Scriptures; that formatting device factors as a neglected but unusually important aspect of the Bible's history as a public document.

Implicit as well as explicit moral judgments are inevitable in any work on a subject like the Bible. Nonetheless, since this book has been written first for historical illumination, I hope it can be understood as trying above

all to provide a responsible reading of its sources. One of the most important distinctions that struck me from those sources was the difference between turning to the Bible as a source of didactic instruction versus using the Bible as a treasury of evocative examples. It is the difference between basing an analysis of current events on one phrase taken from a single biblical narrative and grounding it in detailed exposition of an extended passage of scriptural instruction. From that admittedly loose distinction, the pages that follow sometimes move to a historical judgment—that the Protestant claim to be guided by Scripture was most convincing when Bible-users reasoned step-by-step from scriptural texts to this-worldly applications. By contrast, when such applications rested on rhetorical, figurative, or allegorical uses of Scripture, it is easier to conclude that something other than biblical authority—from political, class, economic, racial, gender, or other sources—was shaping the application of Scripture. All such historical conclusions and historical judgments are of course fallible, which is why full documentation has been provided so that others may check, and perhaps correct, my account of what the historical figures wrote or said.

It is also obvious that historical judgments bleed easily into moral judgments. Probably as a result of my own convictions about the Bible, I have been more likely to view allegorical, exemplary, or merely rhetorical usage as somehow less authentically scriptural than usage based on didactic reasoning. For example, the fiery Boston minister Jonathan Mayhew sometimes snatched a phrase from the Psalms on which to base entire sermons aiming at celebrating a political event, reinforcing a political opinion, or stirring up his hearers to political action. On another occasion, he preached a lengthy expository sermon to argue that the thirteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans did not require colonists to passively obey the dictates of Parliament.²¹ Although such distinctions can never be entirely clear-cut, these two ways of deploying Scripture did represent empirically distinguishable approaches, which in turn requires a historical judgment about how those examples conformed to—or trivialized—the Protestant profession to follow Scripture. If, however, I go on to imply that Mayhew's exposition of Romans 13 deserves more serious consideration as a possible rendering of what God through the Scriptures actually intended, that judgment verges from the historical to the moral. Although I have tried to differentiate such evaluations from each other, readers are forewarned about slippage between the two.

Finally, *In the Beginning was the Word* does not affirm “American exceptionalism,” except in a limited historical, as opposed to moral, sense.

Historically evaluated, certain features of American experience deserve to be considered distinctive in world history; one of the most distinctive has been the central place of Scripture in American life. From that judgment, however, I do not conclude that those distinctives have given the United States a unique claim to moral, political, or religious superiority. While I hope that those who want to make judgments about the character of American moral, political, and religious life might benefit from this book, those judgments are not my primary concern. Instead, the chief goal is an explanatory narrative about changes over time for the place of Scripture, together with an assessment of the relative influence that Scripture has exerted at different times in relation to other cultural authorities and social forces. In my view, some of this colonial American engagement with Scripture made the nation that came later a better place and left a positive influence in the world; some made it a worse place and helped unleash malevolent forces in world history.

Prelude

CATHOLIC BIBLES IN THE NEW WORLD

IN LATE 1501 and early 1502, Martin Luther was studying at the University of Erfurt, where he had recently matriculated as a student; it would be another two or three years before he first read through the Bible in the Latin Vulgate copy held in the university library. In England, Arthur Tudor, the Prince of Wales and heir apparent to the English throne, had only recently married Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain. Arthur's father, King Henry VII, who hoped this marriage would cement an Anglo-Spanish alliance to check the expansive designs of France, gave his younger son, Henry, Duke of York, a prominent role in the wedding. Otherwise, since this younger son was not the heir, he attracted only minimal public attention. In France, Desiderius Erasmus had recently returned from a lengthy visit to England where he had made the acquaintance of Thomas More and John Colet. The latter had left a particularly deep impression by a style of preaching that turned aside from scholastic authorities to speak directly from the New Testament. Inspired by Colet's example, Erasmus dedicated himself to learning Greek and began to collect older Greek and Latin manuscripts of the New Testament.¹ The founding events that occasioned the rise of Protestantism with its dedication to Holy Scripture lay still in the future.

Over that same winter and early spring, Christopher Columbus, undertook a whirlwind of activities in Spain. Despite poor health, he was preparing for a fourth voyage to the New World, contesting judicial charges brought against him by a rival, compiling a *Book of Privileges* to secure grants and titles he considered his due—and revising a large manuscript that became known as the *Libro de las profecías*.² The last, a motley aggregation of texts, included many quotations from church fathers like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but it mostly contained biblical passages that Columbus felt predicted either his own special role in exploring

the oceans or his contribution to the Christian recapture of Jerusalem. For this effort, Columbus drew from forty-three different books of the Bible (thirty-two Old Testament, eleven New), including selections from over half the Psalms.³

After dedicating the manuscript to Ferdinand and Isabella, he cited several authorities on what he explained as the standard exposition of Scripture by “four methods” (history, allegory, moral teaching, “heavenly glory”). He then began by quoting from John chapter 15: “All things, whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you.” A comment from Augustine on how Scripture sometimes used the past tense to predict “future things” supplied Columbus with his warrant for the biblical interpretations he assembled in the *Libro*: they would speak of events taking place in his lifetime or soon to unfold. The lengthy dedication to the Spanish monarchs that introduced the compilation thanked Ferdinand and Isabella for sponsoring his labors and then explained the motivation that had driven him through three voyages of discovery and now prepared him for a fourth: “Who can doubt that this fire was not merely mine, but also of the Holy Spirit who encouraged me with a radiance of marvelous illumination from his sacred Holy Scriptures, by a most clear and powerful testimony from the forty-four books of the Old Testament, from the four Gospels, from the twenty-three Epistles of the blessed Apostles—urging me to press forward? Continually, without a moment’s hesitation, the Scriptures urge me to press forward with great haste.”⁴ As experts on the life of Columbus have shown clearly, the fixation on mystical and prophetic meanings of Scripture seen in this manuscript from 1502 represented only the last stage in a long history of intense religious experience. Often Columbus interpreted that experience with a direct application of biblical texts, or even more often by inserting himself into the scriptural record, as he did at critical moments during his first voyage in September 1492 when he likened himself to Noah and Moses.⁵

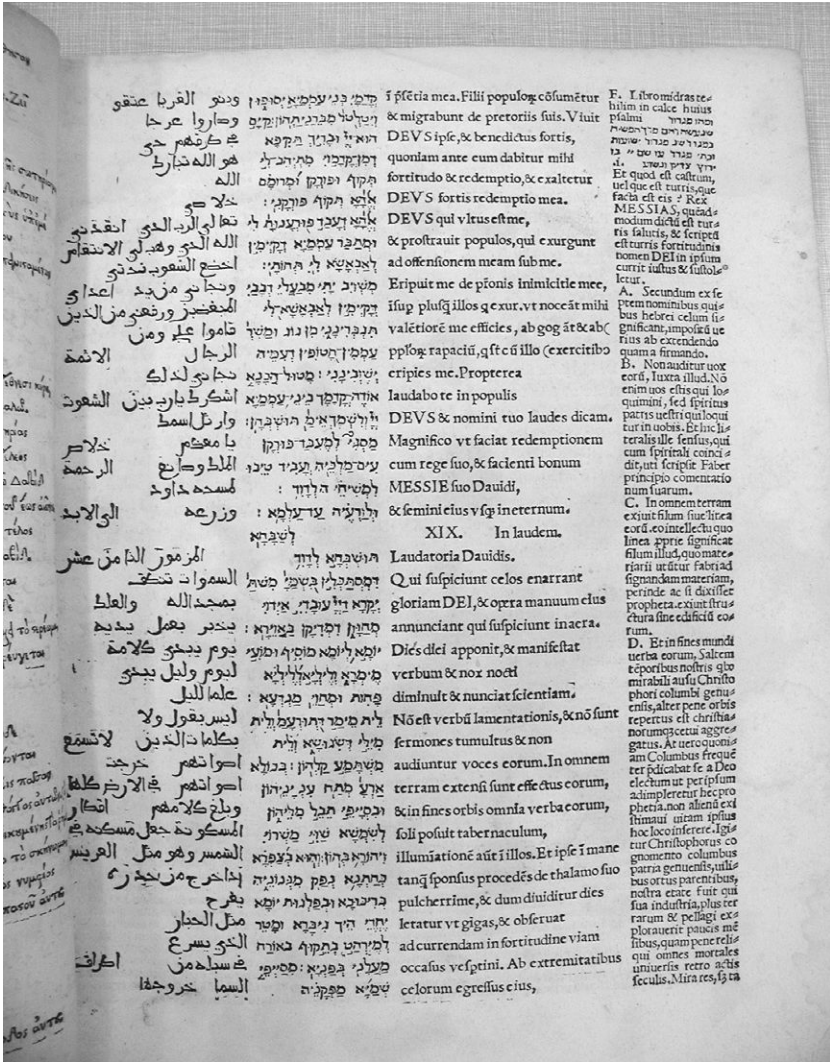
Parallels to what appeared later in American history with ardent British Protestants are unmistakable. Columbus exhibited the same mastery of content from the entire Scriptures, the same deep confidence in the Bible as divine revelation, and the same willingness to read his own experience into the scriptural story. If his hermeneutic came from the Middle Ages instead of the sixteenth century’s New Learning and if his theological guides were Catholic instead of Protestant, he nonetheless embraced the Bible with what might be styled Puritan ardor. Although this book as a history of “the Bible in America” will record a mostly Protestant story, it is important to recognize who came first.

Intense Catholic engagement with Scripture marked a great deal of the initial European exploration and conquest of the New World. A notable publishing first in 1516 testified to the depth of that engagement. In that year Erasmus also published his landmark *Novum instrumentum omne* in Basel, a bilingual edition of the New Testament, featuring a Greek text that Erasmus had collated from several extant manuscripts, alongside the text of the Vulgate—and which, as the pages to come reveal, inspired many early Protestant leaders. It was two years after a team in Spain guided by Cardinal Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros completed and printed their more extensively researched Complutensian Polyglot, with an even more reliable Greek text, but four years before that Polyglot was released to the public. In 1516 Martin Luther was lecturing to students at the University of Wittenberg on the Psalms. In England, the nation had recently celebrated the birth of a royal princess, Mary, born to Henry VIII and his wife, Catherine of Aragon, whom he had married after his brother Arthur's death—and a young Master of Arts, William Tyndale, was preparing to carry on further language and biblical studies at Cambridge.

Alongside Erasmus's *Novum instrumentum*, the publishing event of 1516 was the *Polyglot Psalter* produced by a learned Genoese, Agostino Giustiniani. His beautiful volume represented probably the first printed polyglot book as well as the first printed Arabic translation of the Scriptures. The Polyglot's eight columns offered the Psalms in the Latin Vulgate, two other Latin translations by Giustiniani, Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Arabic, with the eighth for the editor's wide-ranging commentaries (*scholia*). Psalm 18:5 in the Vulgate (19:4 in later Protestant Bibles) reads *in universam terram exivit sonus eorum et in finibus orbis verba eorum* ("Their sound hath gone forth into all the earth; and their words unto the ends of the world," Douay-Rheims-Challoner). It was adjacent to this sentence that Giustiniani inserted a publishing first: the substantial biography of his fellow Genoese, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea. This account, of approximately 1,600 words in English translation, lauded Columbus for his discoveries, though it did not hesitate to criticize Spanish depredations on natives ("Spain sent her poison to an innocent world"). It also spelled out clearly the connection between this comment on the Psalm and the sailor's own convictions: "Since Columbus often declared that God had chosen him to fulfill this prophecy ['to the ends of the world'] through him, I have not considered it inappropriate to insert here his biography."⁶ In years to come, many other Christian inhabitants of North America would read the fate of their own communities into the Scriptures, but few

by integrating modern history and ancient Scripture so thoroughly as in Giustiani's Polyglot.

The devotion to Scripture witnessed in Columbus's life continued to mark a significant minority of other Spanish settlers in the New World. Conspicuous in that number was Bartolomé de las Casas whose life shines as a rare humanitarian beacon against the darkness of Europe's cataclysmic



This page with Psalm 18 in Agostino Giustianini's Polyglot Psalter of 1516 includes the first published biography of Christopher Columbus as an extensive side note. (Courtesy of the American Bible Society Library)

assault on North American native peoples. As a boy in Seville, Las Casas had witnessed the return of Columbus from his first voyage in 1493; he would later preserve for posterity primary sources documenting the admiral's voyages in his *History of the Indies*. In contrast to Columbus, however, Las Casas's application of Scripture to the New World featured direct ethical teaching rather than speculative prophetic interpretation. After traveling to Hispaniola with his merchant father and working there for a short period, Las Casas came back to Spain where he was ordained a deacon and then, in 1507, a priest. Upon his return to the Indies, especially after joining the Dominicans in 1522, he campaigned relentlessly for humane treatment of the Indians. Through a number of important publications and impassioned personal appeals to Spanish officials, in the New World as well as at the Spanish court, Las Casas became his era's most conspicuous advocate for native rights and dignity.

Guidance from the Scriptures infused all of Las Casas's activities and publications. Nowhere was that guidance more prominent than in the manuscript *De Unico Vocationis Modo* ("The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith") that he first composed in 1534 and thereafter used as an intellectual warehouse supplying arguments, citations, references, and resources for later publications, letters, and public appeals.⁷ In 1537 he prepared an expanded version for presentation to King Charles I of Spain (whom we will meet later as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V).

The manuscript's two main sections explained "True Evangelization" and "False Evangelization." The first drew on patristic and medieval church authorities, but even more heavily on Scripture, to explain how the Christian gospel should be promoted; the second, with much detail specifying Spanish atrocities in the New World, he again supported from church authorities and with selective quoting from the Bible.

Early in the first part Las Casas established the Christian church's mandate for evangelism by noting "the universal command as it is stated in Matthew 28:19–20: 'Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.' And Paul to the Romans (10:17): 'Faith comes from hearing, hearing from the word of Christ.'" His next sentence summarized the argument of the entire work: "Therefore the way of teaching people has to be a gentle, coaxing, gracious way."⁸ Within only the next few paragraphs, Las Casas cited or quoted from Matthew 10, Luke 9, Acts 13, again Matthew 10, Luke 10, again Mathew 10, and Matthew 11.

He intended the catena of quotations to explain what “It all means: learn from me [Christ] that you also may be meek and humble of heart.”⁹

Las Casas of course wrote as an individual of his own times, with assumptions about power, prerogatives, people, and progress commonplace for his particular setting. Yet his reliance on traditional church teaching, including an extensive deployment of Scripture, also equipped him to stand against powerful conventions of his age and to advocate for the Indians as few other Europeans did. Whether that ability came from a quirk of personality or from the Christian sources he channeled for his advocacy cannot be determined by ordinary historical reasoning. It nonetheless remains striking that for a Continental history where Protestants long monopolized claims about allegiance to Scripture, a Catholic appearing on the scene before Protestants arrived showed clearly what that allegiance could mean as a force resisting, as well as expressing, Christendom.

Las Casas, however, was far from typical. The Franciscans, Dominicans, and eventually Jesuits who accompanied the Spanish, Portuguese, and then French to the Americas did their best to transform colonial outposts into sites of Christian civilization.¹⁰ Yet their own weaknesses, alongside the colonizers’ lust for dominion, compromised almost all of these efforts.

For a history of the Bible, the kind of easy familiarity and ready use seen in Columbus and Las Casas—and also promoted by the Bible-centered reforms of the Ximénez circle in Spain—carried on in the New World through the first half of the sixteenth century.¹¹ In 1548 a printed collection of sermons, *Doctrina Christiana en lengua española y Mexicana*, included the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew chapter 6 as well as other brief passages in Spanish and Nahuatl.¹² Earlier, the first archbishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, encouraged the translation of selections from the New Testament gospels and epistles into Nahuatl for use in catechetical instruction. His promotion of such work paralleled his opposition to notions spread by other Spanish settlers that the Indians lacked the intelligence to understand the written Scriptures. Zumárraga’s reply was unequivocal: “I do not approve the view of those who say that the simple-minded should not read the sacred text in the language that the common people use, because Jesus Christ desires that its secrets be spread abroad widely.”¹³

Given these sentiments, it is not surprising that Zumárraga joined Las Casas in petitioning the Vatican to protect the Indians against imperial assaults. Their efforts prompted the landmark bull promulgated by Pope Paul III in 1537, *Sublimus Dei*, which appealed to “the testimony of the

sacred scriptures” to repudiate what the pope called a satanic lie, “that the Indians of the West and South . . . should be treated as dumb brutes created for our [the Europeans’] service.” Instead, “the Indians are truly men,” they are fully capable of receiving the Catholic faith, they deserve ordinary rights to their property, “nor should they be in any way enslaved.”¹⁴ Advocacy for the Indians spilled over naturally into a desire that they hear and read church teaching, including the Scriptures, in their own languages. To that end, several other Franciscans joined Bishop Zumárraga in translating portions of the Bible, extending even to parts of the Old Testament like the Book of Proverbs.¹⁵

The Catholic reforms of the mid-sixteenth century redirected new-world engagement with Scripture. By tightening church organization, regularizing doctrine, and reacting to the spread of Protestantism, the church considerably restricted access to the Scriptures by the laity. Steps undertaken for European purposes soon affected the New World as well. The incorporation of natives into the universal church became focused more on proper administration of the sacraments and less on possession of biblical knowledge.¹⁶

The manifest Protestant enthusiasm for Bible translation into vulgar languages meant that when Casiodoro de Reina’s 1569 Spanish translation appeared in Basel as a Protestant project, it immediately went on the Index of Prohibited Books that had condemned such publications for Catholics since 1559—and so was also banned in New Spain and the Indies.¹⁷ The reassertion of bishops’ control over priests and priests’ control over the laity dampened impulses that had worked to put Scripture into the hands of the people at large. Tighter cooperation between church officials and Catholic regimes, often implemented by the Inquisition, also restricted the circulation of Scripture. In 1572 the Inquisition Council in New Spain prohibited the importation of vernacular Bibles. A generation later, between 1600 and 1604, the Dominican bishop of Santo Domingo, Agustín Dávila Padilla, supervised the public burning of three hundred such Bibles confiscated when merchants tried to smuggle them into Hispaniola.¹⁸

In the early seventeenth century when French exploration and settlement began in what is now Canada, standard Catholic practice included the reading of Scripture within religious communities. In a letter from 1639, a Jesuit reported back to superiors in France on the ordinary structure of a day: “then follows dinner, during which is read some chapters from the Bible; and at supper Father du Barry’s *Philologie of Jesus* is read; the benedict and grace is said in Huron, on account of the savages who

are present.”¹⁹ As suggested by this letter, early Jesuit teaching for Indians included some biblical bits translated into native languages, but only in the church formulas prepared for the natives. For the most part, however, Scripture remained securely tethered to prescribed readings prepared for closely regulated church use. In the early 1630s the elderly Samuel Champlain, as an example, assembled and read a great deal of Christian literature in Quebec. But the biblical content of such reading lay embedded within texts that had received the imprimatur, like *Fleurs des saintz*, *Pratique de la perfection chrestienne*, or the *Chroniques et instruction du père Sainct-François*.²⁰ Among native converts, relics from the early Jesuit martyrs and then a focus on their martyrologies occupied the central place roughly analogous to the place of Scripture among Protestants.²¹

For Catholics the Bible remained essential, but distinctly as the church’s book. By the early seventeenth century, when the first permanent Protestant settlements were only just taking root, the earlier Bible-and-church consciousness of the Las Casas era had moved a considerable distance toward a church-as-sole-authority practice. The first Protestants in the generation of Luther, Tyndale, and Henry VIII—all of them indebted to Erasmus’s biblical scholarship—were watching. As they proposed reforms based on fresh reading of Scripture, they too wanted to keep scriptural authority and church authority in balance. But once having unleashed the Scriptures, it would not be easy.