

The Holy Bible, τὰ βιβλία τὰ ἅγια in Koine Greek in which *τα Βιβλία* stands for “the books”, is indisputably the Book of books. It is sacred to Christians and Jews; it has been translated into all world languages, including dead and even never-existent (the Esperanto). Perhaps nothing influenced the English and eventually American literature and literary language more than the so called King James' Bible, an English translation of the Bible commissioned by James I to about fifty scholars in 1604 and completed in 1611. As Leland Ryken puts it: “The King James style is a paradox: it is usually simple in vocabulary while majestic and elevating in effect. However imitated or parodied, the language is dignified, beautiful, sonorous and elegant.” Edmund Wilson added: “other cultures have felt its impact, and none — in the West, at least — seems quite to accommodate to it. Yet we find we have been living with it all our lives”

For hundreds of years the Bible has been an inspiration for artists and poets, musicians and scholars, archaeologists and philosophers. This is the Book on which American presidents are sworn into the office; it is the Book on which thousands of people pledge their allegiance to the United States when becoming its citizens. Since the dawn of manuscript production to the printing age it has been world's most widely copied and printed book.

In November 18, 1950 the *Antiquarian Bookman Magazine* reported that by the end of 1950 (the 500th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention), over two *billion* Bibles will have been printed, with 25 million *more* being added each year. At this rate, the total number of Bibles printed by the year 2013 will exceed five billion copies. It was said that “one could walk the history of printing on the spines of great Bibles”; indeed from Gutenberg to the printers of Pennyroyal Caxton Bible many artists and printers strived to produce a masterpiece.

The history of the Bible is intricately bound to the history of the book, specifically

In our exhibit

Originally a sect of Judaism, Christianity adopted many of its practices, including reading aloud from Hebrew Scriptures at services. As Christians began to acquire a distinct identity, they began also to acquire a distinct corpus of writings, and began to read from those texts at services as well. They designated these writings as the “New Covenant,” rather than the “Old Covenant” represented by the Jewish Scriptures.

Early Christians adopted the codex, rather than the roll, to transmit these writings. Most surviving codices from the early Christian era only comprised a single quire with the text of a single book. The codex, according to Michelle Brown, was “a cheap alternative favored by a persecuted underclass.” (Brown 46) Many more books than are now included in our New Testament circulated by means of these codices, including Gospels, Epistles, and Apocalypses attributed to various disciples. It wasn’t until after the legalization of Christianity with the Edict of Milan, issued by Emperor Constantine in 324, that Christians began to settle on the books that today form the canonical New Testament, a process that was finally completed in the late fourth-century. The Bible outgrew the form of the single-quire codex that could be secreted to an illegal prayer meeting. Single volume Bibles, or “pandects” began to be produced at this time, though only rarely, playing “a mainly symbolic role.” (34) An affordable and portable version did not become available until the thirteenth-century.

Beginning in the last decades of the 4th century, St. Jerome began translating the Bible into Latin, the language of the people.

During the Middle Ages, Biblical texts frequently were collected according to liturgical function. Thus there was an Evangeliary, Epistolary, and Psalter

“I perceived in the middle of the great hall, a large and wide basket full of old parchments; and the librarian, who was a man of information, told me that two heaps of paper like these, moldered by time, had been already committed to the flames.”

So begins Konstantin Tischendorf’s account of his discovery of the earliest surviving Greek Bible, Codex Sinaiticus, a manuscript of the 4th century. Tischendorf was a noted German Biblical scholar, a real life “Indiana Jones” of the 19th century. He had travelled several times to the Near East, where he had gained trust of monks and access to one of the world’s most old and closely guarded libraries, that of the monastery of St. Catherine, on the mount Sinai. The monks of the monastery still show the Tischendorf’s letter where he promised to return the manuscript, which is now resided in the British Library.

While the specimens of Ellis Library Special Collections do not rival the Codex Sinaiticus in importance or dramatic history, we hope that you will experience some of the thrill of the great discoveries. From the humblest fragment to the sumptuous editions of the Bible commissioned by kings or modern businessmen, they are all, while being timeless, could tell you about time and age.

They hide stories of those who created them, of those who admired them, or whose family's history is still recorded on them. Today you become part of their history as you rediscover them.

A random fact for label: Judith is extracanonical according to the Hebrew canon.