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A Testament To Change: Early Scraps Of the Bible

Rare Fragments Show Evolution of Scripture

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If 40 percent of Americans refuse to believe that humans evolved from earlier hominids, how many will accept that the book we know as the Bible evolved from earlier texts and was not handed down, in toto, by God in its present form?

The fossil evidence for human evolution is permanently on display at the American Museum of Natural History. Hard evidence that the Bible took its present shape over centuries will be on display for the next 11 weeks, from today through Jan. 7, across the Mall at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

They are rarer than dinosaur bones, these fragments of papyrus and animal skin that tell the Bible's story. With names such as Codex Sinaiticus, the Macregol Gospels and the Valenciennes Apocalypse, they evoke lost empires and ancient monasteries as surely as archaeopteryx and ceratosaurus conjure up primeval swamps and forests.

The Sackler's exhibition, "In the Beginning: Bibles Before the Year 1000," is one of the broadest assemblages of this material ever brought together in one place. "It has not happened before, and we will not see its like again in our lives," said guest curator Michelle P. Brown, professor of medieval manuscript studies at the University of London.

These are documents with the proven power to shake faith. That's what happened to Bart D. Ehrman, author of the 2005 bestseller "Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why."

Ehrman was a born-again Christian from Kansas when he entered Chicago's Moody Bible Institute at age 18. After three decades of comparing ancient manuscripts in their original languages to try to determine the earliest, most authentic text of the New Testament, he is now an agnostic.

"I thought God had inspired the words inerrantly. But when I examined the historical texts, I realized the words had not been preserved inerrantly, and it would have been no greater miracle to preserve them than to inspire them in the first place," said Ehrman, now chairman of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

But if these fading papyrus leaves and purple parchments inscribed with silver ink *can* shake faith, that does not mean they *must*.

Brown, who pulled the Sackler's exhibition together in association with Oxford University's Bodleian Library, sits on the governing board of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. "That's a pretty good tip-off," she said, that she is a member in good standing of the Church of England.

"There's nothing here that's going to shape or challenge people's beliefs, except on one point," she said. "It will challenge the belief that the Bible originated in the form we have today, rather than being the result of the very complex process of a lot of people of faith using scriptures to help them live God-focused lives."

Her eyes flashing, pink cheeks turning pinker, Brown warmed to her point.

"If people come looking to find something new about Jesus, they won't find it in this exhibit. That's not what it's saying. But it is saying that we didn't start out with this," she said, producing a red Gideon's Bible from her Washington hotel room and giving it a resounding thwack with the palm of her hand.

The modern text, but in an old-fashioned presentation, is the focus of another Washington exhibition, "Illuminating the Word: The Saint John's Bible," now at the Library of Congress. It showcases a handwritten, illuminated Bible commissioned by a Benedictine monastery using paints from hand-ground lapis lazuli, malachite, silver and gold.

The Sackler exhibition opens with a shamelessly romantic bow to the Indiana Jones-style adventurers and collectors who unearthed some of the most ancient texts -- or bought them in what Brown calls "dodgy, backstreet deals" -- mostly in Egypt between about 1850 and 1930.

A wooden chest holds a jumbled, crumbled heap of illegible parchment and paper, part of the actual trove that the Talmudic scholar Solomon Schechter brought to Cambridge University from the genizah, or storeroom for damaged sacred texts, of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue in 1897. A life-size photographic wall mural shows Schechter in his Cambridge study, holding his head as he contemplates the immense jigsaw puzzle laid out before him on wooden worktables.

From there, the exhibition turns somber, literally and figuratively. The lights dim to protect the manuscripts. Some of the most famous --

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such as a deteriorating fragment of the Book of Isaiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls found in a cave in 1947 -- are, in this context, surprisingly unimpressive. It's the progression that counts here, the gradually changing form and content and concept of the Bible, and it really picks up when Hebrew scrolls give way to early Christian writings in Greek.

From papyrus documents purchased in Egypt in the 1920s by American mining magnate Chester Beatty, there is the earliest known copy, dating from about 200, of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, which many scholars think was the first of the New Testament scriptures to be written. There are older fragments of New Testament writings in existence. But this is "the earliest of the first," in the words of Charles Horton, curator of the Beatty collection housed at Dublin Castle, Ireland.

The first three or four centuries of the Common Era are what, borrowing from the language of fossils, might be called the "Bibliocene" period, the time when Christian communities were writing and exchanging letters and gospels, or accounts of the "good news" about Jesus.

Pointing to what she called "cheap, scrappy little bits," Brown explained that "Biblia" were pamphlets or booklets, a few leaves bound together, and that the early Christians liked them because they were easily hidden and allowed quick comparisons between texts. Richer folks preferred scrolls and sneered at books; the Sackler exhibition contends that the book format developed alongside Christianity and achieved social acceptance in the Roman Empire at the same time that Christians did, in the 4th century.

When Christianity became the state religion, Brown argues as she walks on, there was a natural impulse to codify it. Among the writings that ultimately were not accepted into the Christian canon, the Sackler shows a 2nd-century fragment of the Unknown Gospel, which includes the story of an attempt to stone Jesus, and a 3rd-century papyrus known as the Sayings of Jesus, including this one: "Jesus says: A prophet is not acceptable in his own country, nor does a physician work cures on those who know him."

As Christians were establishing what was in and what was out, they began compiling the New Testament in a book, or codex. In the physical and ideological heart of the exhibition are two stained parchment pages of meticulous Greek script from one of the most celebrated: Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in 1859 at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Desert.

Ever since it came to light, Sinaiticus has been a pivotal document -- and a theological challenge -- for scholars like Ehrman. Together with a few other documents, it forms the basis for the most authoritative modern versions of the Old Testament in the original Greek.

Ehrman noted that its version of the Gospel of John is missing the story of the woman taken in adultery, the famous parable in which Jesus says to those who would kill the woman, "Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone." He and many other textual scholars believe the adultery story was not introduced into John until the Middle Ages.

The second half of the exhibition moves from relatively plain writings to the elaborate, illuminated manuscripts produced to wow potential converts, glorify God and boast of wealth and learning. In rich green, yellow and red tones, the 9th-century Macregol Gospel from Ireland used intricate calligraphy at a time when some Christians viewed figurative drawings as idolatry. The gorgeous Stockholm Codex Aureus is purple-dyed parchment inscribed in silver and gold ink. (Brown said scholars once assumed the purple color came from whelks, but recent tests on other manuscripts have indicated it might come from vegetable dyes -- or even stale urine.)

For pure symbolism, however, it would be hard to top the Latin translation of both the Old and New Testaments commissioned by the Abbott Ceolfrith when he retired from the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow in northern England in 716. The Sackler has just a few leaves of one of these volumes. As a gift for the pope, Ceolfrith called for a huge, lavishly illuminated version, which took three people to lift. The message it was meant to send, according to Brown, was that "the farthest outpost of the empire is where it's at now; we can outdo Rome in craftsmanship, we can outdo Rome in scholarship."

That message, apparently, was received. Sometime in the 9th or 10th centuries, Ceolfrith's name was scratched out of the Bible sent to the pope. It was replaced with the name of an Italian saint, and the codex was assumed to be Italian until the 1880s.

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