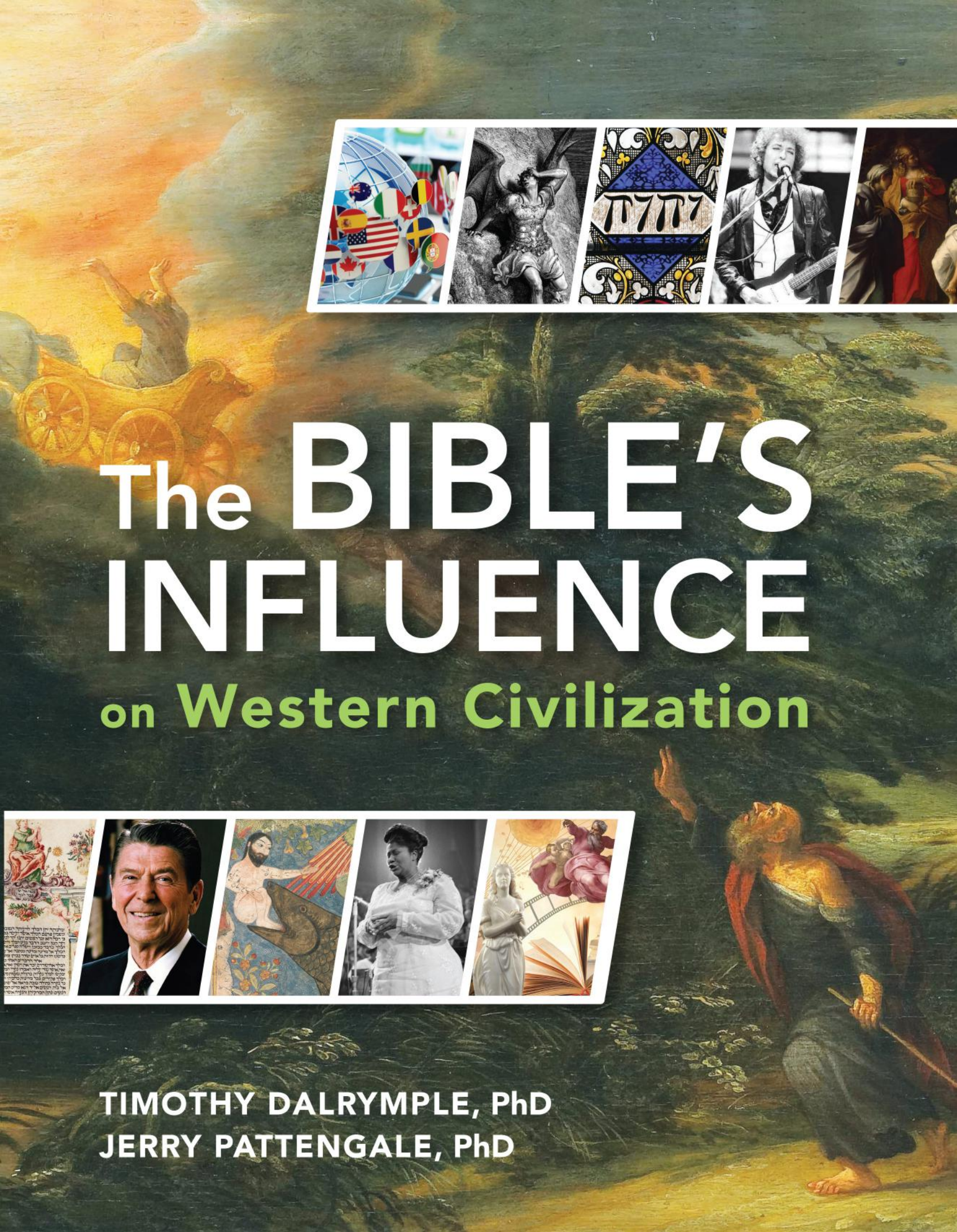




The BIBLE'S INFLUENCE

on Western Civilization



TIMOTHY DALRYMPLE, PhD
JERRY PATTENGALE, PhD

The Bible's Influence on Western Civilization

Copyright © 2026 by Museum of the Bible.

Written by Timothy Dalrymple, PhD and Jerry Pattengale, PhD, with David Charles, Nicholas DeNeff, and Amy Van Dyke.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any database or retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

ISBN: 979-8-89317-500-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025947160

Published by Museum of the Bible™, a publishing imprint of Global Publishing Partners, LLC, Nashville, TN.

The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book was correct at press time and disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause. Furthermore, any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.), telephone numbers, or the like in this book are offered only as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by the publisher.

Scripture quotations marked (CEB) are from the Common English Bible, copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission. (www.CommonEnglishBible.com).

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version, which is in the public domain.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the New King James Version®, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

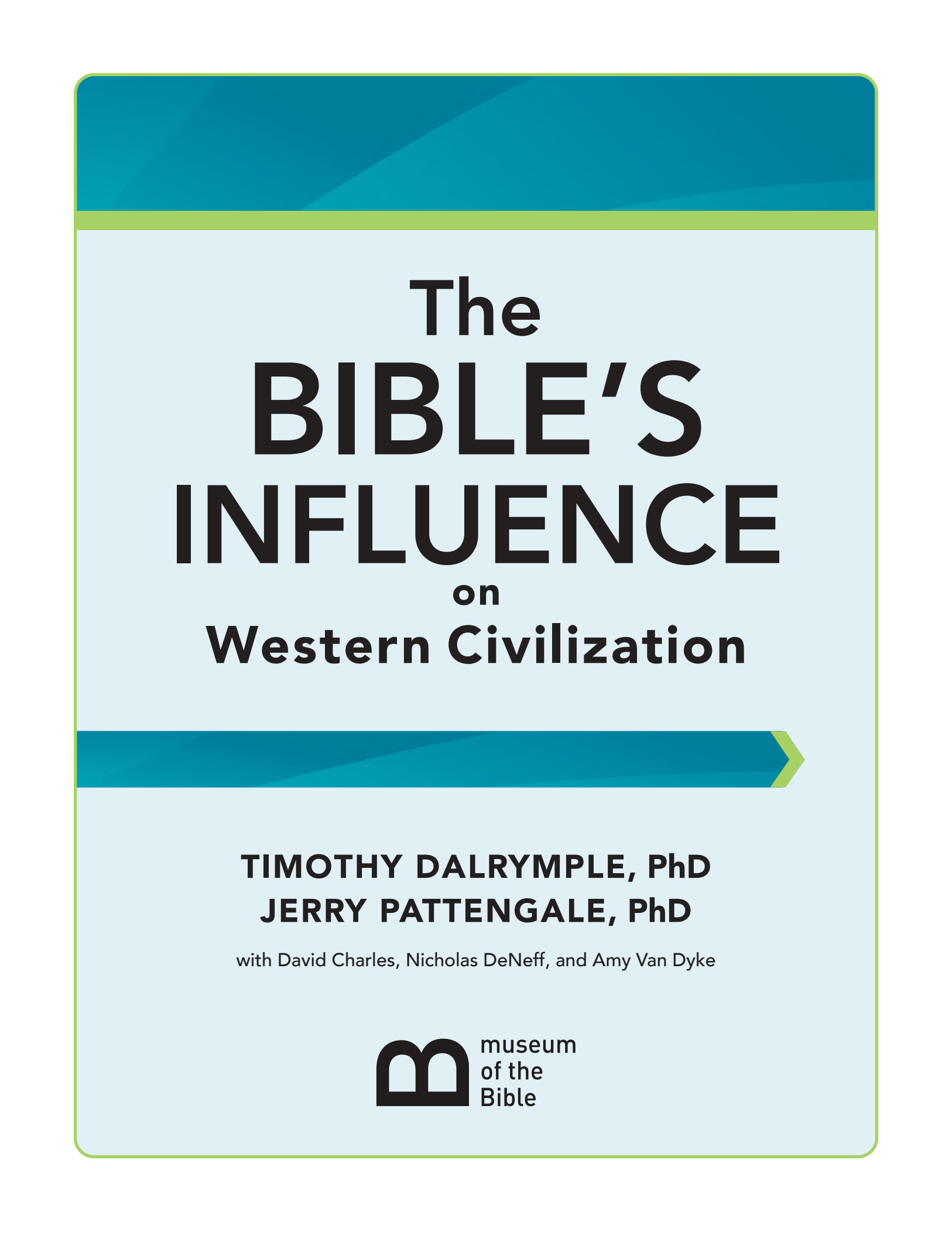
Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked (TIB) are from The Israel Bible, copyright © 2025 by Israel365. <https://theisraelbible.com>. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All images are in the public domain unless otherwise indicated in the image index.

Printed in the USA.

26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 JOS 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The BIBLE'S INFLUENCE

**on
Western Civilization**



TIMOTHY DALRYMPLE, PhD
JERRY PATTENGALE, PhD

with David Charles, Nicholas DeNeff, and Amy Van Dyke

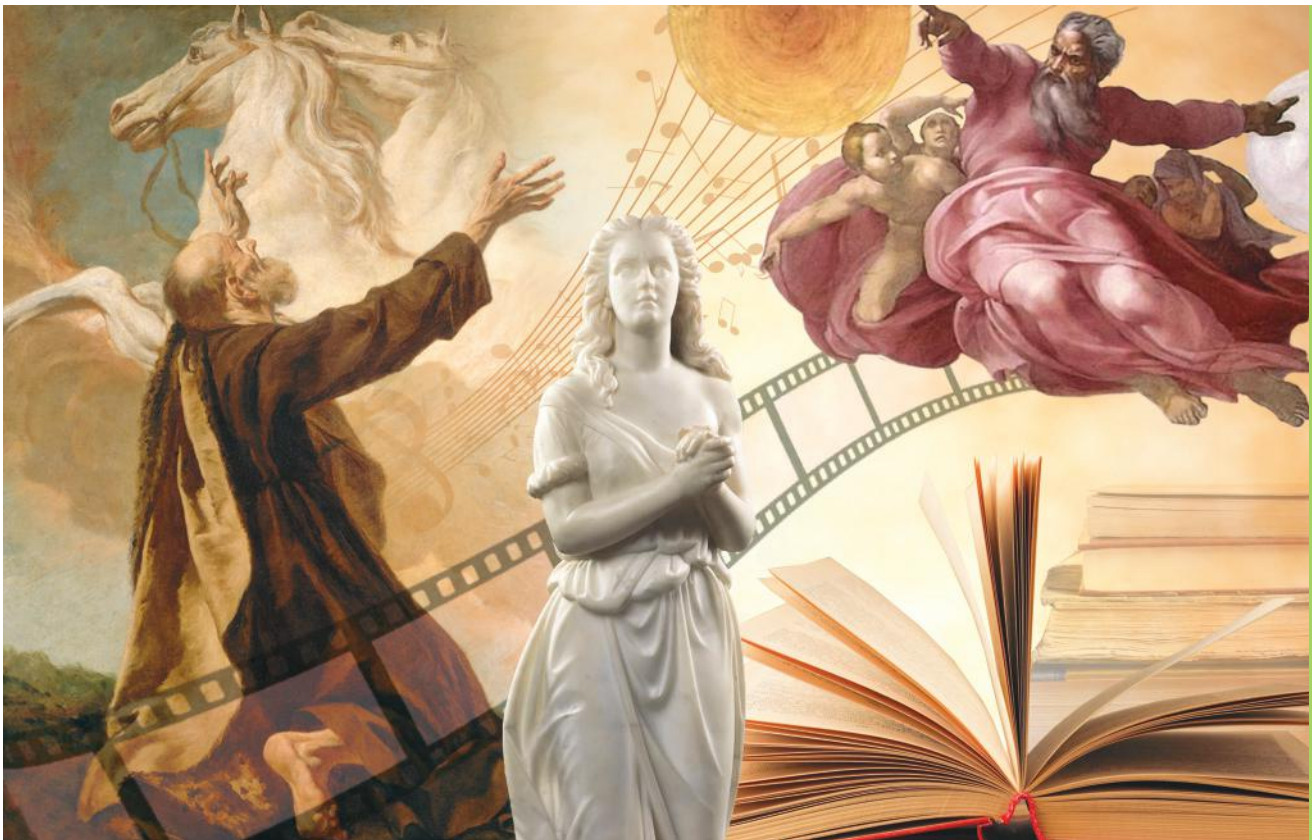


Contents

1 Introduction	1	21 Under a New Star	179
2 The Creation.....	7	22 Mary.....	187
3 Adam, Eve, and Sons	15	23 John the Baptist	197
4 Noah and the Ark	25	24 Disciples and Followers	205
5 The Tower of Babel	33	25 The Miracle Stories of Jesus	213
6 Abraham and Isaac.....	41	26 A Message on a Mount	221
7 Jacob	49	27 Jesus and Women	229
8 Joseph	61	28 Parables of Jesus	237
9 "Let My People Go"	69	29 Social Issues	247
10 Wandering in the Wilderness.....	77	30 The Last Supper.....	257
11 Joshua	87	31 The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus	263
12 David	95	32 The Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus.....	271
13 Solomon	105	33 Return from the Dead	281
14 Early Prophets: Elijah and Elisha	115	34 Peter.....	289
15 Latter Prophets.....	123	35 Paul	297
16 Jonah.....	133	36 Revelation	305
17 Esther	141	37 Conclusion.....	315
18 Job.....	151	Notes	321
19 Psalms	161	Image Index.....	324
20 Daniel	169	Contributors	331

Introduction

What Is the Bible? How Have Its Stories Influenced History and Culture?



You've heard it in the music of U2, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, as well as Stravinsky and Handel. You've seen it in movies like *The Matrix* and *Evan Almighty*, in literary classics like *The Divine Comedy*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Moby-Dick*, and in *The Lord of the Rings*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and the *Harry Potter* series. You've encountered it in countless paintings, sculptures, and buildings. You've heard it in the names of friends like Adam, Joshua, Ruth, David, Esther, Mary, John, Peter, and Paul. You've even heard it in speeches by presidents and other famous figures, and in common phrases like "the writing on the wall," "like a lamb led to the slaughter," and "eat, drink, and be merry."

What you have seen and heard in all these cases, whether you realized it or not, is the remarkable impact

of the Bible on culture throughout the ages. No matter where you were born, where you live, what kind of movies you watch, what books you read, or what music you listen to, the cultural impact of the Bible is an inescapable part of life. In fact, many of the greatest accomplishments of Western civilization—including paintings and sculptures, dances and musicals, films and television shows, cathedrals and monuments, social movements and political declarations, books and poems, even entire languages and countries—would look very different without the influence of the Bible.

We can only truly understand the world we inhabit, and the cultural treasures that represent some of the highest peaks of human achievement, if we are familiar with the Bible.

The Bible's Influence

What This Textbook Is About

This textbook invites you on a journey of investigation. On this journey, you will learn about prominent creative expressions from Western culture—works of art, films, sculptures, musical compositions, dances, and so on. Those items have one thing in common: they were all inspired or influenced by the Bible in one way or another. You will visit libraries, museums, and theaters. You will meet famous artists, musicians, filmmakers, poets, and sculptors. And you will see how the Bible inspired and shaped their work.

Each chapter begins with a striking example of the cultural influence of a certain biblical story or set of stories. Those stories are then summarized, to help you understand further examples of the Bible's impact on Western (and sometimes non-Western) culture. The emphasis throughout is not on the details of the biblical narrative or its interpretation. The emphasis is on the Bible's impact, and how a greater familiarity with the Bible leads to a deeper understanding of the cultures we inhabit.

Every chapter maintains a strictly neutral tone in matters of religious faith or theological interpretation. Biblical passages are not cited or examined as the source of values or moral lessons. Nor is the Bible used to endorse or critique any particular idea, cause, individual, or group. Finally, the textbook does not address questions of historical accuracy or the Bible's authenticity. The biblical stories are treated as stories worth knowing and understanding because they have been so broadly influential.

Popular Phrases

The Bible's influence is found not only in art we can look at, music we can listen to, and places we can visit; it is also in the very language we speak. The following ten popular phrases are among the hundreds of expressions that entered English from the Bible:

- To fall by the wayside
- A city on a hill
- The land of milk and honey
- A leopard cannot change its spots
- Like a lamb led to the slaughter
- To move mountains
- At the eleventh hour
- The blind leading the blind
- By the skin of your teeth
- Feet of clay



Research Assignment

1. Use the internet to find the biblical source of each of the ten phrases.
2. What does each phrase mean? Use each one in a sentence.

A Few Facts

Cultural impact cannot be fully captured in numbers or statistics. But the following facts indicate the Bible's historical prominence and continuing influence:

- Over five *billion* copies of the Bible have been printed and sold.
- The Bible is the most-read book in history.
- It has been translated in its entirety into more than 750 languages; portions of the Bible have been (or are currently being) translated into more than 3,000 additional languages.¹

Examples of the Bible's Influence

Later, when we read the assigned biblical stories, we will see that a familiarity with those stories helps us understand more about history and culture. For now, we will look at five types of cultural media in which the Bible's influence is found: film, painting, music, sculpture, and literature.



In the early 1950s, legendary Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille made it clear that his next movie would be his biggest ever. He had already made one film about the biblical story of Moses—*The Ten Commandments*, released in 1923. The new film would bear the same title. By the time it was finished, it had also become the most expensive film made to date. One scene—the parting of the Red Sea—cost over a million dollars and took over a year to create and shoot. The scene required a 32-foot-tall water tank that could produce a flood of 360,000 gallons of water in two minutes flat.

DeMille and his crew relied on extensive research. In an attempt to represent the biblical story and setting as accurately as possible, the filmmakers consulted 950 books, 984 periodicals, 1,286 clippings, 2,964 photographs, and 30 libraries and museums. The movie was a huge success. More recent film adaptations of biblical stories include Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014).



In early November 1966, the city of Florence, Italy, experienced its worst flooding in over 600 years. Days of rain swelled the Arno River. Water flowed into the city streets and many buildings, damaging or destroying thousands of treasures in the art-filled city where the Renaissance began.

Among the affected masterpieces was a large painting by Giorgio Vasari. Created in 1546, its five panels depict one of the best-known scenes from the Bible: the Last

Supper. In the 1966 flooding, the painting, hanging in a cathedral museum, was completely immersed in a mix of water, oil, and sewage for over twelve hours. A young museum apprentice named Marco Grassi rushed back from Switzerland when he heard the news. He and others immediately got to work attaching paper to the priceless painting to keep the paint from separating from the wet wood. It took 50 years for conservation experts to repair the damage. Vasari's painting is but one of thousands that reflect biblical stories, figures, or themes.



Among the genres of music that have played a key role in American history is the African American spiritual. Some of the best-known examples include "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Such music originated with enslaved people in the American South.

Spirituals first emerged amid informal gatherings of slaves in the 17th century. Compositions borrowed from African culture, biblical stories, and the harsh experience of slavery. The genre flourished in the 19th century and became a means of expressing the faith, hopes, and despair of the slave community. The name of this kind of music comes from a verse in the Bible: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19, KJV).

The genre also reflects the Bible's influence in other ways: many spirituals retell stories about biblical figures like Daniel and Moses, and they often focus on themes reflecting the slaves' own situation: work, captivity, oppression, and the desire and struggle for freedom. The prominent 19th-century writer and former slave Frederick Douglass described what singing these songs meant to him and others: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North—and the North was our Canaan."²



David, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1623–1624. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy.



Sculpture

No other artwork is "equal to it in any respect, with such just proportion, beauty and excellence."³ That was Giorgio Vasari's estimation of a sculpture created around 1500. The Renaissance artist Michelangelo may be better known as the painter of the Vatican's grand Sistine Chapel ceiling, but he viewed himself first and foremost as a sculptor. His sculpture of the biblical figure David—an imposing, exquisitely detailed creation from marble that stands almost 17 feet tall—is the object Vasari so greatly admired. Other artists had depicted a triumphant David after his victory over the enormous Philistine warrior known as Goliath. Michelangelo

chose to capture a different moment in the story: David stands, relaxed but focused, with his sling in hand, ready to take on his opponent.

Bernini was another Italian artist who created a sculpture inspired by the biblical character David. Although this sculpture is also a freestanding marble carving, it is very different from Michelangelo's. Bernini depicts David *during* the battle, rather than before. This life-size David is anything but calm. He is twisted in action as he pulls back his sling with both hands. His muscles are tense and his face grimaces in concentration. Unlike Michelangelo's *David*, this figure interacts with his surroundings. He seems more realistic. As these examples show, the same biblical figure can be the basis of very different artistic results.



Literature

The influence of the Bible is evident across a wide spectrum of classic English works from different authors, regions, and time periods: from *Beowulf* to the novels of William Faulkner, and from Shakespeare to the poetry of Robert Frost. Some works of literature contain brief allusions to biblical figures or elements in the narrative. Other literary creations—like John Milton's classic *Paradise Lost* (1667)—are vast retellings of a biblical story that elaborate and expand on the source material. As you will discover in the coming chapters, many of the themes, plots, and characters of Western literature are based on the Bible.

The examples presented thus far only scratch the surface. As we will see in the journey we are about to begin, the Bible has also shaped language, the calendar, politics, civil rights and human rights movements, business, philanthropy, and medicine, and the fundamental ways we think about ourselves, our world, and the passage of time.

Vocabulary

- > **Estimation** [noun], a judgment of the value or quality of something or someone
- > **Philanthropy** [noun], the promotion of others' welfare, especially through donating money

The Bible and Culture

What Is Culture?

The most commonly used words are often the hardest to define. In the mid-20th-century, two American anthropologists surveyed how the term "culture" had been used and found 164 separate definitions.⁴ The meaning and usefulness of the concept is still debated.

Nonetheless, the general concept of culture can be distilled as follows: Culture refers to the attitudes, values, and behaviors that are shared by a group of people. As people live together, they develop certain ways of thinking and doing things. The language you speak, the clothes you wear, and the movies you watch are all part of your culture. As you travel from one place to another, you will find that culture changes.

Two basic categories of culture are material culture and nonmaterial culture. Material culture consists of physical objects, like a tool, a book, or a building. Nonmaterial culture includes shared ideas, rules, or assumptions.

We will discover that the Bible's impact on culture has been expressed in a wide variety of ways, in material and nonmaterial culture alike.

What Is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of dozens of writings that emerged over the course of centuries

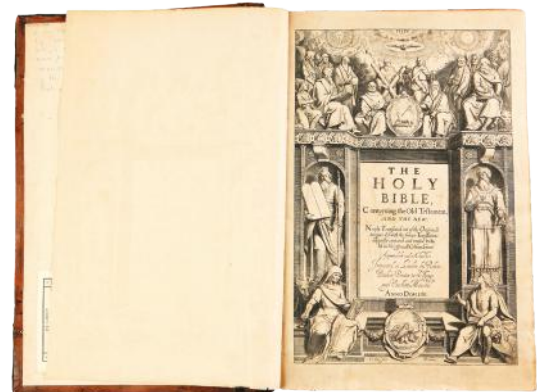
in the Eastern Mediterranean region, in the vicinity of present-day Israel. Those writings were written, collected, and edited by multiple people. "The Bible" means different things to different groups. For Jews, "the Bible" refers to the Tanakh, or what Christians call the Old Testament. The books of the Tanakh were written in Hebrew (with some portions in Aramaic), so it is sometimes called the Hebrew Bible. For Christians, "the Bible" refers to the books of the Hebrew Bible (the "Old Testament") as well as a set of Greek writings called the New Testament.

We will examine the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament, since both have produced such a profound impact on history and culture. But it's important to note that the New Testament is not part of "the Bible" for most Jewish readers, and that some groups of Christians include certain books and stories in their Bible that other groups do not.



Did You Know ...

- Jews and Christians count the "books" of the Hebrew Bible differently. Jews count 24 books in their Bible, in part because the writings of the "12 Minor Prophets" are considered a single book. Christians count 39 books in the Old Testament, because the minor prophets are counted separately, and Christians count some books as two (such as Ezra and Nehemiah, or 1 and 2 Samuel) that Jews count as one.
- It is not only the Bible itself but also translations of the Bible that have exercised a great influence over culture. Jerome became a major figure in Western art for his translation and standardization of the Bible into Latin. Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German shaped the German language. The King James Version, an English translation published in 1611, contributed to the English language even more new idioms than Shakespeare!



The King James Version, 1611.

Features You'll Find in Each Chapter

Impact on Culture:

The opening section of each chapter offers an in-depth look at a biblical story or set of stories.

Reading:

In order to understand the impact of a biblical story, you must know the story itself. Brief excerpts are assigned and summarized. Readings focus only on those portions of the biblical narrative that illuminate the examples of cultural impact in that chapter.

Investigation:

In each investigation, you will visit different times and places to examine one or more examples of the Bible's cultural impact.

Answer the Questions:

Each chapter contains questions that will help you deepen your understanding of the material.

Title:

Each chapter begins with a title that introduces its content and themes.

Psalms
How Have the Psalms Been Used to Express Emotions?

Impact on Culture
While his talent for music was already evident as a child, the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904) didn't become famous until well into adulthood.

Reading
Psalms 55, 60, 69, 137
One type of psalm, psalms of lament, are expressions of grief or suffering, often combined with a plea for deliverance. Both individual and communal laments are found in the book of Psalms.

Investigation
Classical Music
Among the dozens of psalms in the lament category is a group of seven known as "penitential psalms" (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). Each of the seven is a prayer for forgiveness.

Answer the Questions
How does the engraving by Solomon reflect the themes or tone of Psalm 60?

Our Main Assignment
The book of Psalms contains an eclectic mix of some 150 compositions, including a variety of genres and styles. Some psalms are hymns of thanksgiving. Others are songs of lament. Many contain deep emotion and poetic eloquence. A large number of them are attributed to King David.

Did You Know ...
For centuries, Psalm 137 has been a favorite biblical text among composers and musicians. The first verse in particular appears in a wide variety of compositions: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion" (KJV). The opening phrase is featured in the famous nineteenth-century opera *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi.

Vocabulary
> Eclectic [adjective]
covering a broad or diverse range

Summary
The psalms are a vast collection of expressions of profoundly felt emotions—grief, anger, joy, surprise, sadness, and hope, among others. Few specific people or places are mentioned. Instead, the psalms are full of metaphors and universal human sentiments.

Psalms 1

Note: Sample page for illustrative purposes only.
Not an actual textbook page.

Our Main Assignment:

Here you will find what to look out for as you learn about the cultural influence of one or more biblical narratives.

Did You Know ...

Brief cultural references are found in these sections.

Vocabulary:

Definitions are provided for words that may be unfamiliar.

Summary:

Each chapter concludes with a brief summary of the key points conveyed.

Summary

As a collection of stories, extended narratives, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecies, dreams, and visions, the Bible has for centuries provided a source of inspiration for Western culture. Its figures, themes, and narratives have been expressed in every imaginable art form, including painting, film, sculpture, music, and literature. The purpose of this course is to examine the Bible's cultural impact—an impact that shows, even in the 21st century, no signs of abating.

The Creation

How Did an Ancient Creation Narrative Inspire Michelangelo, Haydn, and Many Others?



The Creation of the Sun, Moon, and Plants, ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo, 1508–1512, Vatican City.



Impact on Culture

There's a small building in Vatican City that attracts up to seven million visitors a year. In the summer, we might find some 25,000 people waiting to see what's inside. The line to enter sometimes stretches for nearly a mile. We join it. Even the longest lines at Disney World rarely reach such lengths. This popular building, called the Sistine Chapel, has been standing here since the 15th century. What could be inside that keeps people waiting like this, even in the stifling heat?

Finally entering the chapel, we look up. On the ceiling high above are luminous scenes from a story told long ago.



Our Main Assignment

The opening sentence of the book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, NIV), is one of the most famous phrases in world literature. As the first verse in the Bible, it sets the stage for the story of creation and all that follows. Let's tour art, music, and literature to investigate the influence of the story of creation.



The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo, 1508–1512, Vatican City.

To learn about this masterpiece, let's travel back to the start of the 16th century, when Rome was the world's artistic center. In this era, in the middle of what historians call the Renaissance, legendary artists such as Botticelli, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci delight the masses with sculptures and paintings of exceptional passion, precision, and drama. But the artist that many consider the greatest of all, Michelangelo, is about to compose possibly his greatest masterpiece, right on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Pope Julius II, seeking to decorate the chapel ceiling, turns to Michelangelo Buonarroti, a Florentine artist. The task is monumental. Michelangelo must paint a two-thousand-square-foot "canvas" across the sloping surfaces of a barrel-vaulted ceiling. He works in fresco, an ancient technique that requires spreading plaster across the wall and moving quickly to apply the colors before the plaster dries, when the colors will set permanently into the plaster. Michelangelo must do all this on an upside-down surface, standing on a platform more than 60 feet in the air!

Michelangelo will apply his tremendous intelligence and ingenuity to the technical challenges—but what should he paint? The pope has asked him to paint Jesus's 12 apostles. Michelangelo, however, wins permission to pursue another subject, focusing on stories from Genesis. He begins his work in 1508, standing atop the elaborate scaffolding and craning his neck to paint. He will continue his great work, with interruptions, until 1512.

Viewing the works of Michelangelo and other Florentine masters in the chapel you can see many of the biblical stories. Yet the ceiling is Michelangelo's alone. It represents nine scenes from the book of Genesis. Three well-known ones are taken from Genesis, chapter 1.

As it happens, many of Michelangelo's most renowned works—such as his sculptures *David*, *Moses*, and the *Pietà*—also reference Bible stories. Yet the Sistine Chapel's impact has been surpassing. Not too long ago, artists painstakingly restored the chapel frescoes to make the images brighter and sharper. Upon seeing the refurbished chapel for the first time, German author and filmmaker Werner Herzog (b. 1942) wrote: "I was overwhelmed with the feeling that before Michelangelo no one had ever articulated human pathos as he did in those paintings. Since then all of us have understood ourselves just that little bit more deeply."¹

Vocabulary

> Ingenuity [noun]

cleverness or creativity

> Scaffolding [noun]

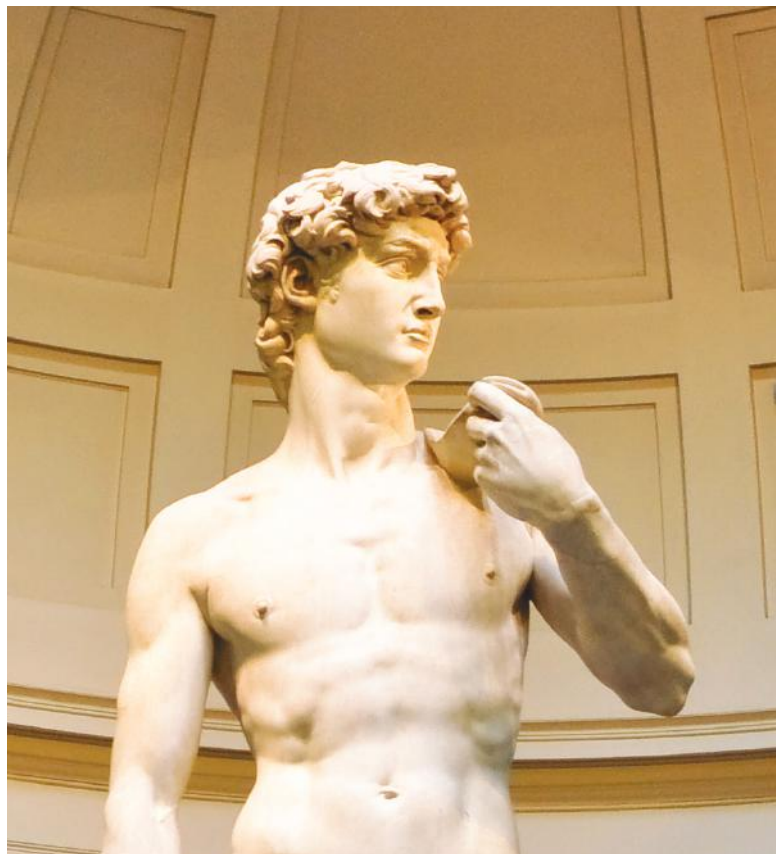
a temporary structure, often made with wooden planks and metal poles, to support workers cleaning, fixing, building, or decorating a building

> Pathos [noun]

the quality of something in life or art that stirs up feelings of sympathy and sorrow



Moses, Michelangelo, 1513–1515. San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, Italy.



David, Michelangelo, 1501–1504. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.

Reaction from Michelangelo's Contemporaries

Like a 16th-century rock star, Michelangelo sparked curiosity and excitement while painting the Sistine ceiling. In 1510, the pope, impatient to see it, forced Michelangelo to remove the scaffolding temporarily to show the parts he had completed. The accompanying crowd was stunned by the

breathtaking masterpiece and began to spread the word. Michelangelo's style and techniques, his use of color, the precision of his anatomical work, the sense of mass and weight he conveyed in the people he painted, and their straining postures and dynamic movements shaped the history of Western art.

Scenes from the Story of Creation, Sistine Chapel

The Separation of Light from Darkness



Answer the Questions

- 1 Who is the central figure depicted by Michelangelo in this scene?
- 2 Why do you think there seems to be a bright side and a dark side in this picture?

The Separation of Land and Water



Answer the Questions

- 1 Where does this scene appear in Genesis?
- 2 How does Michelangelo create a sense of motion?

Vocabulary

> **Anatomical** [adjective], relating to the human body or the study of it



Research Assignment

We found out there's a connection between the very first story of the Bible and one of the greatest artistic masterpieces of all time. What other examples can we find of how this story from Genesis has shaped the culture we inhabit?

Take a look at Genesis 1:1–2:3. What is the story, what does it have to do with the Sistine Chapel, and why have so many musicians, artists, and authors found it compelling?

1 The Creation



Oxford Philharmonic and New College Choir, recording Joseph Haydn's *The Creation*.



Reading Genesis 1:1-13

When we read Genesis 1, one of the first things we'll notice is the sense of order and symmetry, even rhythm. The narrative is divided into "days," and each of the first six days begins with "God said" and ends with an "evening" and "morning." In the story, God declares on each day (apart from the second day) that what he has created is "good." On the first three days, the basic materials of the world are called into being and separated, making space for the creation of life and humankind. God separates light from darkness, the "waters below" from the "waters above" (KJV), and the land from the sea. On the third day, he begins to populate the land with plants. This movement from chaos to order, from the "void" to diversity and harmony, has inspired creative talents for thousands of years. Next, let's seek evidence for the influence of the creation story in music.

Joseph Haydn, Thomas Hardy, 1791.
Royal College of Music Museum,
London, England.



Investigation Classical Music

The great Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), after hearing a production of *Messiah* composed by his colleague George Frideric Handel, was inspired to draft his own musical work centered on a biblical theme. A friend passed along a short libretto (a text written for use in an opera or other musical work) based upon the Genesis narrative. From 1796 to 1798, Haydn expanded it into a multi-part oratorio called *The Creation*.



Answer the Questions

Listen to the opening overture, titled "The Representation of Chaos," in Haydn's *The Creation*.

- 1 Close your eyes and listen. What imagery comes to mind?
- 2 How does Haydn communicate the concept of chaos?
- 3 How does Haydn represent the transition in the narrative from chaos to God beginning his creative work?



The Creation of the Animals, Jacopo Tintoretto, ca. 1550. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.



Reading

Genesis 1:14–2:1

On the fourth day, the story continues, God creates the sun, moon, and stars. He uses them to separate the days, the seasons, and the years, and to separate the light of day from the darkness of night. On the fifth day, God creates the animals of the sea and sky, and tells them to "be fruitful, and multiply" (KJV).

On the sixth day, God forms the creatures on land, including people. While God, according to the story, creates each animal "according to their kinds" (NIV), he creates humankind "in the image of God." God charges the people to "be fruitful" but also commands them to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion" over other creatures.



Investigation

Work of Art

A valuable addition to our collection will be *The Creation of the Animals* by Tintoretto, ca. 1550. Traveling from Rome to Venice, we'll find this famous piece in the Gallerie dell'Accademia.



Answer the Questions

Look carefully at this painting.

- 1 What is the artist attempting to depict by illustrating a sky and sea full of life?
- 2 Think about the locations of God, the birds, fish, and land animals in the artwork. What is the artist illustrating through their various placements?
- 3 Tintoretto depicts God as a grandfatherly figure with a flowing beard and robes. Many artists have chosen to depict God like this. What may have motivated this artistic decision?

3

The Sabbath



Reading

Genesis 2:2-3

At the culmination of the creation narrative, God looks at everything he has made, affirms its goodness, and rests from his labors. The rhythms of the earlier days fall into silence. In English this seventh day is often called the Sabbath, from the Hebrew *Shabbat* (from the verb to "rest" or "cease" from activity).

The Seven-Day Week is shaped by the Genesis creation story

Have you ever wondered why we have seven days in a week? Why not five? Or ten? As it turns out, other cultures have had "weeks" with as many as 13 days and as few as four or even three days in them.

There's no commandment in Genesis that human beings should observe the seven-day pattern of the creation story. That comes later in the Bible, in the famed Ten Commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God." This is explicitly connected to the creation story: "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Exodus 20:8-11, NKJV).

Arranging days into weeks was not a new concept. People needed to know when others would be working, or at the marketplace, or celebrating religious festivals. So they gave names to the days and coordinated days of work and days of rest. The ancient Hebrews were not the only people to give spiritual significance to the span of seven days. The Babylonians appear to have framed a seven-day week as a quarter of a lunar cycle, with holy days occurring every seventh day (and perhaps "rest" every fourth week, on the 28th day).

Some scholars believe the Jewish tradition of the Sabbath may have taken some inspiration from the Babylonians. But the Sabbath is also distinctive. In the Jewish tradition, all labor must cease every seventh day,

The Hebrew Bible often uses YHWH (יהוה in Hebrew, based on Exodus 3:13-15) as a sacred name for God. Since the ancient Hebrews who passed down these stories revered God's name and did not want to say it aloud, they would see the letters YHWH but pronounce the word "Adonai," or Lord. Later generations of Jews even added marks around the consonants to show how the word should be read. Most modern translations of the Old Testament use "Lord" where the underlying Hebrew word is "Adonai" and "LORD" where the underlying word is "YHWH" (יהוה).



The Creation of the Animals, Jacopo Tintoretto, ca. 1550. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

in parallel with the pattern of labor and rest described in the creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:3.

Whatever role other ancient Near Eastern traditions may have played, it was primarily the Jewish tradition that passed down to later generations. Julius Caesar reformed the Roman calendar so that there would be seven days per week, but for centuries the seven-day week and the older eight-day week lived on together in the Roman Empire. The first Roman Emperor to promote Christianity, Constantine, made the seven-day week official and changed the day of rest for Christians from Saturday to Sunday. Through the later Roman Empire, and the spread of Christianity, the observance of the seven-day week and a weekly day of rest was transmitted to many nations across the world.

Seven-day weeks developed in different places at different times in East Asia, but increasing amounts of contact and trade with the West made a single system necessary. Today, the seven-day week is observed around the world, and most countries have one or two days for rest per week.

Did You Know...

The Genesis creation story shaped the Western discussion of human rights and equality.

John Locke is often regarded as the father of the modern concept of human rights. Locke, who inspired many of America's founding figures, based his argument for human rights on the notion that human beings are God's "workmanship" and are all "furnished with like faculties" or abilities. In other words, we are all equal. Locke argued that "being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."²

The US Declaration of Independence echoes Genesis when it declares "All men are created equal." Abraham Lincoln, reflecting on these words decades later, said it was the "enlightened belief" of the American Founders that "nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows."³ Abolitionists in the United States often appealed to the "image of God" to express their opposition to slavery. Frederick Douglass, for instance, condemned slavery as "wicked" insofar as it "mars and defaces the image of God by cruel and barbarous inflictions."⁴ According to William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent journalist and abolitionist, the view that God created humankind in his own image

deals "a death-blow to all claims of superiority, to all charges of inferiority, to all usurpation, to all oppressive dominion."⁵ In the words of Pulitzer prize-winning historian David Brion Davis, the abolitionists' deep faith that all human beings were created in the image of God was a major factor driving the abolitionist movement.⁶

Similar sentiments, all referring to the Genesis language of an "image of God," can be found in the writings of leading 19th-century American thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. More recently, Martin Luther King Jr. explained his view to an academic conference on race and religion in Chicago in 1963 that "the image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men"⁷ and that "every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in man."⁸ The belief that all people are created in the divine image was a central driver, according to King, of the movement to treat people of all races justly and equally.

Martin Luther King Jr. addresses a crowd from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, 1963.



Vocabulary

> **Abolitionist** [noun], a person who favors abolishing a practice or institution such as slavery

Summary

In the Renaissance, artists and intellectuals rediscovered a great deal of the Greco-Roman heritage. As shown in the works of Michelangelo and other Renaissance greats, however, biblical scenes and characters remained a major focus. The Roman Catholic Church continued to be a prominent patron of the arts, commissioning works that reflected the Bible, the common storybook of the age. The Sistine Chapel is just one example among many great artistic masterpieces taking inspiration from the creation narrative of Genesis. We also found reflections of the creation story in Haydn's music, in the spread of the seven-day week, and in debates over human and civil rights.