

# The rise and fall of the Bible illuminates the text's unexpected history

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Christians have a buying penchant for Bibles, but Case Western Reserve University religious studies professor Timothy Beal finds "the Word" gets lost between popular culture appeals and value add-ons that tell people how to think and interpret what's in the Bible.

The [Bible](#) has been an all-time bestseller since Gutenberg's presses rolled out the first mass copies, but it remains highly misunderstood, Beal says. As the author of the forthcoming *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), Beal dispels Biblical myths and reveals the book's evolutionary history.

One long-held myth, he says, is that the Bible has always been the same and goes back to one ultimate source or original. The notion is perpetuated with images of Jesus reading from an open book in the synagogue, but Beal points out that the Bible evolved from early scrolls of stories, handwritten three centuries before selected writings were bound in a rectangular bound manuscript, called a codex. One of the first Bibles in book form was the Vulgate Bible, which appeared in the early 5th century under the guidance of Saint Jerome.

Bibles now come in all shapes and sizes, but Beal demonstrates that the writings that appear between those dimpled leather covers and gilded edges—or packaged between dating tips for teens in Biblezines—show one constant: They all reflect the times in which they were published by echoing political and cultural norms.

Current times reflect that change, too, as the digital age heralds a new day for the Bible.

“It is the twilight of print culture and of the book as the dominant medium for literature,” he says. “This means that there will also be an end of a certain way of thinking about and reading the Bible.”

Along with the rise of digital media, Christian consumerism has a role in pushing the Bible further from its original form with graphic versions and magazine forms that are popular among younger readers.

“Christians often talk about the Bible as a rock, but it’s really more like a river; there is change all the way back to its beginnings,” Beal said.

Even the word “bible” has a fluid etymological history. In Greek, ta biblia referred to “the books,” and Jerome used the Latin term bibliotheca, or “library.”

“I like to think of the Bible in this way as a collection of writings – not a book of answers but a library of questions,” Beal said.

One point that is clear regardless of translation or version, Beal says, is that the Bible is a fascinating place to begin questions about life and to find inspiration on the moral and philosophical issues most humans face every day.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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