



TESTAMENT

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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EPISODE 1

ONCE UPON A TIME

Highlights

- Archaeology reveals a tension between the mythic, larger-than-life dimension of biblical personages and the mundane details of everyday life in the ancient world.
- Abraham's journey from Ur to Egypt followed a well-established trading route through the Fertile Crescent, along which culture spread throughout the ancient world.
- Like ancient Mesopotamian myths, the biblical account of creation attempts to define the sacred in human terms and reveal an order and purpose in the world.
- No historical records confirm the biblical account of the Israelites' enslavement in and exodus from Egypt. However, the Bible builds on an Egyptian conception of deity by positing Jehovah as God who not only involves himself with humanity, but also transcends time and space.

Questions to Consider

1. In your opinion, what value do archaeological finds have for biblical studies?
2. For Romer, Abraham's pool at Ur represents "the human idea of sacredness." What does sacredness mean to you?
3. Does the lack of evidence for the Exodus story change your conception of that episode? If so, how?

EPISODE 2

CHRONICLES AND KINGS

Highlights

- As discoveries at Jericho and other sites show, the Bible is not a history of social and political events, but a history of belief.
- The traditions of ancient Canaanites—including Philistines, whom



Near East sites referenced in the series, covering more than 4,000 years of history.

the Bible casts as Israel's enemies—deeply influenced the Bible.

- In ancient Canaan, belief in Jehovah (the God of gods) unified the Israelite tribes once scattered among the hilltops; for them, straying from that belief would spell disunity, defeat, or worse.
- Written over a period of hundreds of years, the Hebrew Bible explains the history of Jehovah's people in terms of their religious identity and their faithfulness to the covenant with their God.

Questions to Consider

1. Do the excavations at Jericho and elsewhere influence your understanding of the Bible?
2. In what concepts do nations or peoples find unity for survival today?
3. How did the Babylonian exile create a crisis of faith for the Judeans? How did it force them to reassess their identity as a people?



EPISODE 3

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Highlights

- During and after the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people venerated their scriptures as the sacred heart of their faith.
- Jewish laws and customs existed in tension with Hellenistic influences until the Maccabees established a Jewish state, roughly 100 years before the Roman conquest.
- Archaeological evidence surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that Jewish scholars moved caches of manuscripts out of Jerusalem before the Roman siege, indicating that the Hebrew Bible existed in different versions as late as 70 CE.
- For hundreds of years after the destruction of Jerusalem, rabbis assembled, copied, and codified the Hebrew Bible; Jewish printers in Soncino, Italy, produced the first typeset version in the 15th century.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the written word become so central to Judaism? How central is it to other faith traditions?
2. Based on what you've learned in this episode, how did the Jewish conception of God differ from those of other ancient cultures?
3. How do the Dead Sea Scrolls and the discoveries at Qumran change your attitude toward the Bible as we know it today?

EPISODE 4

GOSPEL TRUTH?

Highlights

- No contemporary accounts of Jesus exist in Roman or Jewish records. However, historians agree that Jesus of Nazareth was raised in Galilee, preached, healed, argued with temple authorities, and was executed.
- The first Gospels were written decades after Jesus's death;

Christianity became an international movement thanks largely to oral tradition and the letters of Paul.

- In the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, Christianity had no officially codified scriptures. The remarkably diverse movement included mystical sects known as the Gnostics.
- Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon in the 2nd century, was instrumental in the development of the biblical canon as we know it today, beginning with his acceptance of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as Hebrew Scripture.



Saint Irenaeus

Questions to Consider

1. What parts of the Gospel accounts of Jesus of Nazareth do you accept as history?
2. How do you explain the relatively rapid spread of Christianity within the first 200 years of Jesus's death?
3. As portrayed in this episode, does early Christianity seem more or less theologically diverse than today's Christian denominations?

EPISODE 5

THINE IS THE KINGDOM

Highlights

- Besides mandating vigorous persecutions of Christians, the emperor Diocletian reorganized the Roman Empire to consolidate his power.
- When Constantine became emperor and adopted Christianity, the once-persecuted sect became the official religion of Rome and took on imperial trappings.
- Constantine also convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which formulated the first basic statement of Christian beliefs.

- In the late 4th century, Jerome spent 20 years translating the original Hebrew and Greek texts into Latin; his work became the basis for the Latin Vulgate, the Roman Catholic Church's definitive translation.

Questions to Consider

1. In what sense did Constantine need Christianity politically? How did he use it politically?
2. In your experience, what role does ritual play in religious observance? What effect do such things as the incense and vestments of a Roman Catholic Mass create for you?
3. Why do you think Jerome's translation of the Bible provoked such passionate reactions among the faithful?

EPISODE 6

POWER AND GLORY

Highlights

- After the fall of Rome, the Bible and its images were used not only as spiritual resources, but also as means to buttress political, social, and economic power.
- Until succumbing to the Turks in 1453, Constantinople served as the capital of the Eastern Empire, the focal point of Christianity, and a center for scholarship.
- During the Early Middle Ages, monasteries in Scotland, Ireland, and other outposts copied and preserved the works of the ancient world, and helped to spread Christianity throughout Western Europe.
- Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor, established Bible-copying monasteries and used the Bible as the basis for his laws.



Christ Carrying the Cross, El Greco, ca. 1580

Questions to Consider

1. Romer suggests thinking of the Church of Divine Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) as “a vast imperial theatre.” Do you think the comparison is apt? What similarities and differences do you see between religious ceremonies and theatrical performances?
2. The Holy Roman Empire fused religious and moral authority with political authority. What advantages did this bring to Charlemagne’s subjects? What disadvantages do you imagine?
3. How do political leaders attempt to exercise moral authority today?

EPISODE 7

PARADISE LOST

Highlights

- Renaissance ideas (including intense aestheticism), combined with rising nationalism, threatened the social and political order that medieval monarchies and the church had used the Bible to sanction.
- Martin Luther’s interpretation of the Bible and the doctrine of salvation touched off a religious dispute that grew into a political revolution.
- New translations and advances in printing put the Bible in the hands of people who could never have read the church-sanctioned Latin Vulgate.
- In modern life, science and other forces have further undermined the power and influence of the Bible.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you agree with Romer’s assessment that Renaissance aestheticism has contributed to modern humanity’s sense of alienation?
2. What are your favorite or most memorable movies based on Bible stories? How much did they shape your thinking and belief?
3. How has your conception of the Bible changed over the course of this series?

AVENUES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Companion Book for the Series

Romer, John. *Testament: The Bible and History*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1988.

A flood of books about the history of the Bible have appeared since *Testament* was first published in 1988; the book is still in print and contains a list of the series’ basic source materials. Amazon.com (bible+history+books) holds a long list of these later books, which range from photo-essays to cookbooks to multivolume academic tomes.

As to the archaeology, there is little of real substance to add to the fundamental information presented in *Testament*. Professor Norman Golb’s contention that there is no evidence that the community at Qumran produced the Dead Sea Scrolls—which I followed in *Testament*’s third episode—has gained wide academic acceptance, although still, perhaps, somewhat sotto voce. To my regret, we could not film the inscription found in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima that bears Pontius Pilates’s name, and is the only archaeological evidence of his governorship in the Holy Land (Episode 4). Finally, the little silver scroll with the priestly benediction that we identified as the oldest Biblical text in existence (Episode 2) and filmed in an archaeological storeroom, now has its own exhibition case in the Israel Museum.

Though the discovery was kept secret at the time, new portions of the Codex Sinaiticus were found in 1975, during building work in St. Catherine’s monastery. The wonderful website www.codexsinaiticus.org has an up-to-date history of that key text and a high-definition copy of the manuscript. — *John Romer*

General Resources

Armstrong, Karen. *The Bible: A Biography*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007.

Daniell, David. *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

De Hamel, Christopher. *The Book: A History of the Bible*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2001.

Metzger, Bruce M., and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House, Inc., 1979.

Rogerson, John, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Widely available English versions of the Bible

Throughout *Testament*, John Romer relies on a King James Bible that his family has handed down for generations. But the 20th century saw 1,500 fresh English translations of the Bible in whole or in part. Here are a few of the most popular versions available in the United States.

Jerusalem

Variations: Jerusalem Bible (1966) and New Jerusalem Bible (1985)

Background: In a 1943 encyclical, Pope Pius XII encouraged new vernacular translations of the Bible made from the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic sources, rather than the Latin Vulgate. French monks began work on *La Bible de Jérusalem*; an English version was produced in 1966. Highly regarded for its scholarship, it contains copious textual notes as well as contributions from author J.R.R. Tolkien, who translated the Book of Jonah. The New Jerusalem Bible represents a complete revision of the Jerusalem version, reflecting updated scholarship and a word-for-word translation, as opposed to its predecessor's sense-for-sense approach.

King James Version (KJV)

Variations: Authorized Version (1611) and New King James Version (NKJV, 1982-83)

Background: The granddaddy of all English-language Bibles, the Authorized Version of the King James Bible remains the only acceptable text for certain Protestants. Some “KJV-only” proponents object to the gender-neutral or inclusive language of more modern translations; others believe that only the Authorized Version conveys the inerrant word of God. However, its 17th-century English diction and syntax make

it difficult for many of today's readers. The New King James Version modernizes and Americanizes the language, dropping the Authorized KJV's 12th-grade reading level to one accessible to U.S. middle schoolers. The Bibles placed in hospital and hotel rooms by Gideons International are KJV.

New American Bible (NAB, 1970)

Variations: Fireside Catholic Youth Bible (2004), New Catholic Answer Bible (2005)

Background: To revise the Confraternity Version (1941), the Catholic Biblical Association appointed dozens of editors and translators—all Americans, but not all Catholics—to produce the NAB. They relied on original Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew texts for their sense-for-sense translation. Though quite formal, the language has a middle-school reading level. Today, the NAB is the “pulpit Bible” for U.S. Roman Catholics, used in the Mass and other liturgical observances. (The NAB is not to be confused with the New American Standard Bible, a modern word-for-word translation completed in 1971 and produced under the auspices of the interdenominational, California-based Lockman Foundation.)

New International Version (NIV, 1978)

Variations: New International Reader's Version (NIrV, 1995), Today's New International Version (TNIV, 2005)

Background: Commissioned by the New York Bible Society (now Biblica) in 1965, the NIV grew out of conservative American Protestants' dissatisfaction with other Bible translations. A committee of 15 scholars from 34 denominations in different parts of the English-speaking world supervised the 13-year project. Both the NIrV and the TNIV rely on the NIV, but use simpler words and sentences.

New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS, 1962-81)

Variations: New Jewish Version (NJV), JPS Tanakh (1985)

Background: Directed by editor in chief Harry M. Orlinsky, the NJPS

represents a completely fresh English translation of the Hebrew Bible, based on Hebrew Masoretic texts that took their final form in the Middle Ages. Most previous efforts had relied on Christian translations for style and diction. The translation teams included representatives of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Jewish traditions. The NJPS has become the most widely used version among all Jewish sects.

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989)

Variations: NRSV Catholic Edition (1989)

Background: A complete revision of the Revised Standard Version (1952)—which, in turn, had completely revised the American Standard Version (1901)—the NRSV incorporates late-20th-century changes in scholarship and language, such as gender-inclusive wording for some passages. An ecumenical, international committee of translators—including Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish members—supervised its preparation. In the United States, the NRSV is used by many Episcopal, Methodist, and other mainline Protestant churches; the Catholic edition uses the Latin Vulgate’s order for Old Testament books.

Good News Bible (GNB, 1976)

Variations: Good News Translation (GNT), Today’s English Version (TEV)

Background: Consistently one of the bestselling Bibles in the United States, the GNB first appeared as *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today’s English Version*, published by the American Bible Society in 1966. A complete translation, including the Old Testament, followed in 1976. At a sixth-grade reading level, the GNB pioneered a translation philosophy that sought to render original texts not literally, but “thought for thought” in powerful, everyday language. Eugene Nida, one of the originators, described the philosophy’s goal as “to make the same impression on the current reader that the original did on its readers . . . form is sacrificed in the interest of meaning.” This quality makes the GNB beloved by some believers, but regarded with suspicion by others.

THE “OTHER” GOSPELS

Secret Gnostic texts excluded from the Christian Bible

In 1945, a young Egyptian peasant named Muhammad ‘Ali al-Samman accidentally made the single most important archaeological discovery for early Christian studies in the 20th century. Scooping up soil to fertilize his family’s crops near the town of Nag Hammadi, he uncovered a big clay jar containing 13 leather-bound books and some loose papyrus sheets. He took them home, where his mother burned some of the papyrus for tinder. Eventually, 52 surviving texts found their way onto the black market, then into the hands of the Egyptian government, and finally under study by historians and theologians.

As it turned out, al-Samman had found the largest single cache of Gnostic manuscripts ever known. Until then, scholars knew about the Gnostics mostly from incomplete manuscripts or from detailed refutations by Irenaeus of Lyon, who had branded them as heretics. But the contents of the Nag Hammadi jar revealed this mysterious, radical sect directly through their scriptures: Coptic-dialect texts dating from the fourth century, which in turn were translations from Greek manuscripts. Scholars contend that some of the Greek texts were written as early, or



Dead Sea Scrolls

earlier, than the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The Gnostic sect derived its name from its emphasis on *gnosis*—a Greek word for “knowledge,” in the sense of spiritual insight or intuition. They held that all human beings carried divinity within. As God’s emissary, Jesus pointed the way to self-knowledge as true knowledge of God. Perhaps the most famous Gnostic text, the Gospel of Thomas, quotes Jesus as saying, “The Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the sons of the living Father.”



Cave where Dead Sea Scrolls were found

The Nag Hammadi jar yielded the most complete extant text of the Gospel of Thomas. Other so-called secret Gnostic Gospels include:

- The Gospel of Mary: a fragment of a longer text, recounting Mary Magdalene’s private conversations with—and visions of—Jesus.
- The Gospel of Philip: disconnected meditations on topics such as Adam and Eve and the five sacraments performed by Jesus.
- The Gospel of Truth: a sermon attributed to the Gnostic preacher Valentinus, explaining how Jesus came to save humanity from forgetfulness and ignorance.
- The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (The Egyptian Gospel): a baptismal ceremony that includes an account of the creation of the universe.
- The Secret Book of John (Apocryphon of John): an explanation of the divine mind and Jesus’s coming to save humanity from ignorance and death.

- The Secret Book of James: a letter attributed to James the Righteous (Jesus’s brother) recounting question-and-answer sessions between Jesus and his disciples.
- The Book of Thomas (The Contender Writing to the Perfect): a dialogue between Jesus and Judas Thomas on ethics, knowledge, and ignorance. (Some early Christian sects accepted Judas Thomas as the twin brother of Jesus.)
- The Dialogue of the Savior: a conversation between Jesus and Matthew, Judas Thomas, and Mary Magdalene, mostly about the nature of *gnosis*.
- The Second Treatise of the Great Seth: a message attributed to Jesus about the true meaning of his crucifixion. (Some Gnostic texts identify Jesus as a manifestation of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve.)
- The Round Dance of the Cross (The Hymn of Jesus): a song that Jesus taught to his disciples before his crucifixion, which reveals the nature and meaning of suffering.
- The Gospel of Judas: an account of conversations between Jesus and Judas Iscariot, which presents Judas as an agent of divine will and his “betrayal” as an act of obedience. Not found among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, this Gnostic text surfaced on the antiquities black market in the 1980s and was fully translated in 2006.

Many scholars have noted distinct hints of Buddhism and Hinduism in these and other Nag Hammadi texts. Some religious historians, like Elaine Pagels of Princeton University, have argued that the Gospel of John (the last of the canonical Gospels, probably written at the end of the first century) emerged as a rival to the Gnostic texts, particularly the Gospel of Thomas. Of course, John’s Gospel became part of the Christian canon, and its theology became orthodox doctrine. But the Gnostic texts demonstrate the richness and diversity of the Christian tradition from its very beginnings.

THE MAKING OF *TESTAMENT*

by John Romer

I had thought about writing and filming a history of the Bible for many years before I started *Testament*. It took a long time for me to pluck up the courage to leave my usual haunts in ancient Egypt and jump into the sea of faith.

When *Testament* went into development in 1985, most television companies were reluctant to tackle biblical subjects for fear of a backlash from religious groups. *Testament*, fortunately, found a home in a then-small U.S. TV channel called Discovery, who aired it at their New York opening, and were delighted when it earned them a long review in the *New York Times*.

In the U.K., Channel Four had been keen from the beginning, as had Mischa Scorer, a director/producer at Antelope Films. *Testament's* production was undertaken by a large staff housed in magnificent offices in London's Fitzroy Square, where Mischa's desk stood in a room whose architecture had been copied by Robert Adam from part of the imperial quarters in Diocletian's Palace at Split, which figures in Episode 5.

Such was the generosity of budgets in those days that when I announced that the scripts better fitted seven episodes than the originally projected six, a seventh episode was funded right away.

We worked for a year and more before we began to film in 1987, crossing and recrossing the Bible's ancient journeys. Mischa gave me real insight into how television scripts were composed; he also sent me and Beth, my wife, to the Middle East for some six months of field research.

For part of that journey we traveled in our Land Rover, which was stuffed with books. In the Holy Land, we stayed in a beautiful apartment near Bethlehem, from where we visited every major religious site in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank, usually with the excavators' reports in our hands, so that we could walk through the sites' exact relationships to the Bible, step by step.



Modern city of Jerusalem

The trips were unforgettable: the family of otters, running through the rushes by the Sabbah farms at the Lake of Galilee; the endless rows of burned-out cars lying in the desert by the great fortress, which has since proved to have been built as Herod's tomb; Christmas in Bethlehem, with the bishops of the Armenian, Coptic, Catholic, and Greek churches and a guard of the brightly dressed Kawass in Ottoman regalia, beating the ground with their brass-bound sticks; the Israeli officer sent to guard us as we filmed the Jordan River, standing sadly on a bridge that had been peeled back by a bomb like a sardine can. "Amman's just down that road," he said, "but I will never see it." The sheikh in Gaza, who gave us coffee bobbing with cardamoms and showed us a picture of his father with Lawrence of Arabia. My diaries hold many, many memories!

We traveled widely too, in Syria and Turkey, Italy and Egypt. We found the dreaming mound of ancient Harran in eastern Turkey, which was so important for the first episode, by following a tiny, handwritten roadside sign I'd noticed as we drove out of Sanliurfa.



Pyramids of Giza

Nearer to home, the great libraries were equally thrilling. That of the Bible Society in Cambridge, for example, with its shelves of rare and magnificently printed leather-bound Bibles, most of them in marvelous Jacobean English. And the friendliness and generosity of the staff in the Vatican, who helped us to film their most precious manuscripts, among them the oldest-surviving examples of the New Testament, written on rolls of papyrus.

Along with the splendid Rabbi Hugo Gryn—“try not to call the Jews a race, John, it gets us into trouble” (Episode 4)—we were advised by two reverend emeriti professors, Peter Ackroyd and Henry Chadwick, who managed to betray but mild alarm at my interpretation (Episode 5) of the emperor Constantine’s pact with church and heaven!

We tried hard not to offend. I remembered a letter I had once received which told me that a joke I had made on a radio program had caused the writer to doubt their faith. Such was never our desire. Whatever our personal beliefs, Mischa and I approached the subject with the aim of honoring and understanding the histories of the ancient texts that, until a century or so ago, had stood at the very center of our culture. Nor did

we for one moment imagine that archaeology or any scientific test could “prove” or “disprove” human faith.

The first sequence of the series was the last one that we filmed, on a beautiful summer’s morning in an English churchyard. It went off perfectly. The entire project, indeed, had been as well mannered and as intelligent a work as could be imagined. And that, of course, shows in the quality of the finished films.

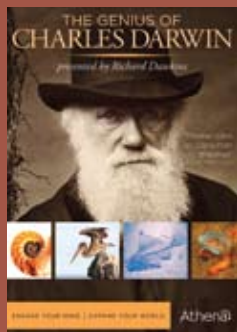
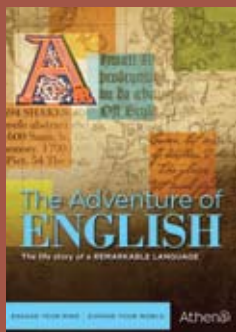
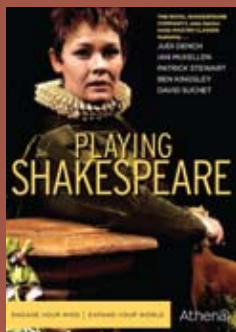
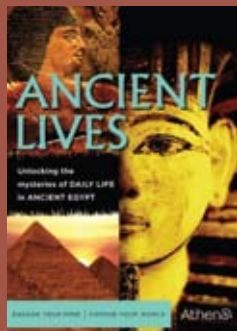
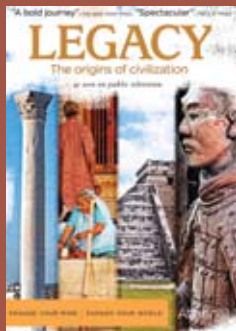
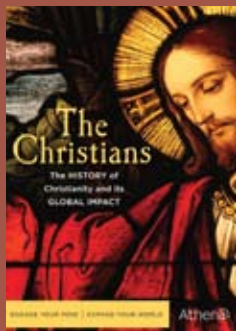
The series was a huge success, as was the book, and I have since lost count of the number of our sequences that have been taken up and made into separate films claiming the “truth about the Bible” and “breakthroughs” of *Da Vinci Code* proportions.

For this release with Acorn Media, I would like to remember two vital members of the *Testament* team who have subsequently died: Mike Lax, sound recordist extraordinaire, and Ron Johnston, a consummate director.

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ALSO ON DVD



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