



Christianity: The Basics — Scripture

If we knew any Arabic at all, there were two phrases familiar to Malaysian children, regardless of our religious or ethnic background.

We woke up every morning to the *azan*—the call to prayer—which begins with the proclamation that God is great, followed by the affirmation that there is no God but God, and that Muhammad is his prophet.

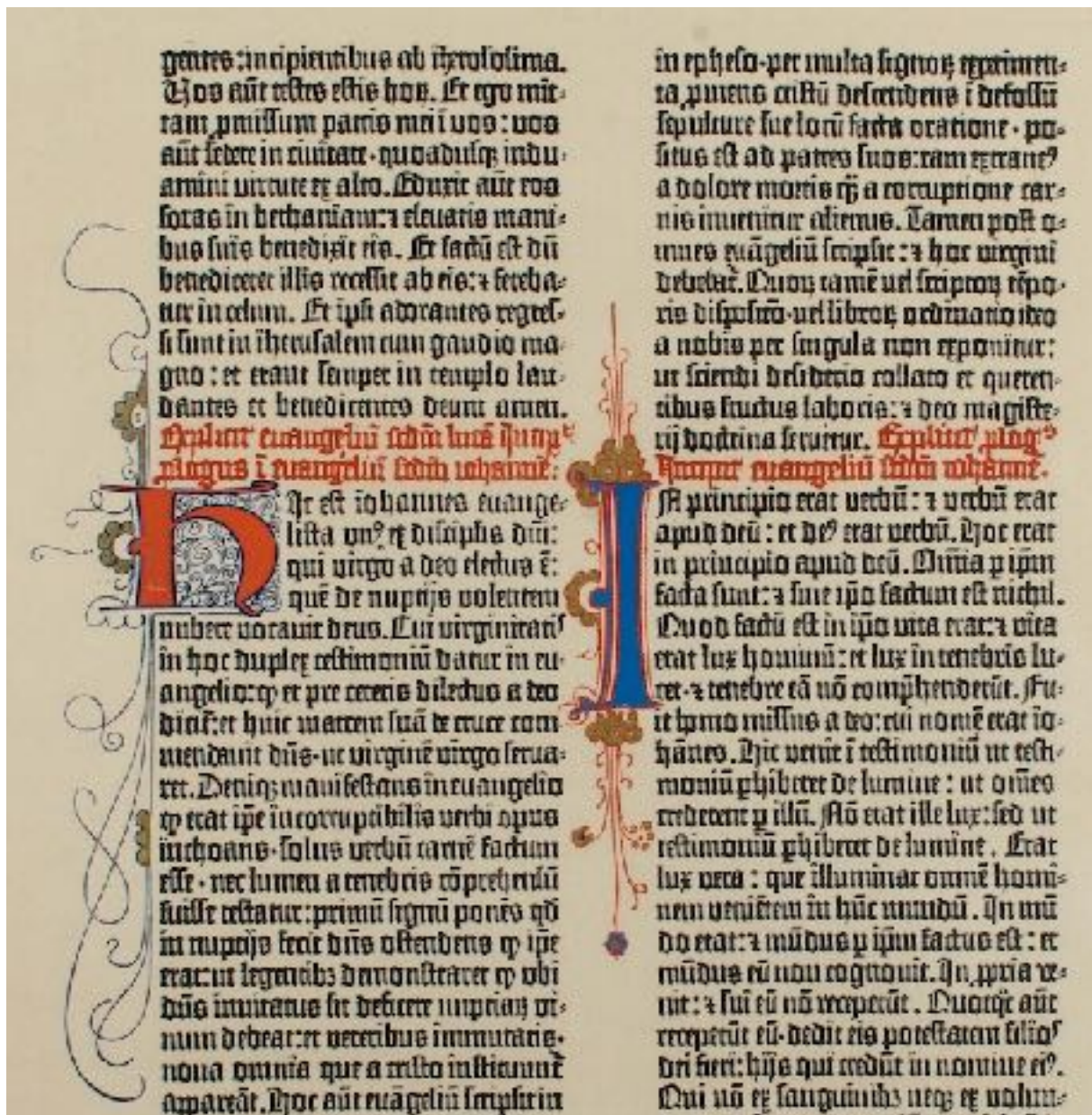
And in the evenings, before the cartoons came on, the Qur'an was read, and it always began: *Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim. Rasulullah shallallahu 'alaihi wasallam bersabda marhumnya...* (In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful. The prophet, may God grant peace and honour on him and his family, says...) And this was followed by the video of a man chanting in Arabic, accompanied by a sign language translator in the lower right hand corner: invariably, a woman in *hijab*.

I have not heard those words said in over a decade, but they are seared into my memory. It is to me what I suppose the theme song for *Eastenders* might be to many of you.

The whole image is seared indelibly into my memory: I must have watched that man chant from those Scriptures hundreds upon hundreds of times, growing up. And yet, when I first picked up a Qur'an—in English translation, and therefore not the real thing, as my Muslim friends were quick to remind me—(when I first picked up a Qur'an) it seemed utterly foreign, far from familiar.

The Qur'an was, in some sense, *our* text, by which I mean the text of the country, though we—like the United States, and unlike Britain (Magna Carta notwithstanding)—have a written Constitution. None of us knew very much about the contents of either, but we at least knew what the Qur'an *was*. It was, however, *not* our text, by which I mean the text of my family, and our cultural context of the Chinese diaspora to which we belonged. It is hard to say what our text was, exactly. There is a good case for it being the *Tao Te Ching*, one of Taoisms fundamental documents, attributed to the great sage Lao Tze in the 6th century BCE. I was once taught to recite it from memory, but—unlike the snippets of Arabic—the classical Mandarin proved to have little staying power. Much more engaging and influential were the myths and legends about the gods and heroes. The Greeks had the Iliad and the Odyssey; the English had Beowulf; and we had the Journey to the West, the epic tale of the monk Tripitaka's journey to India to obtain *sūtras*—Buddhist sacred texts—accompanied by a sand demon, a human/pig demon, and (most famously) the Monkey King, *Sun Wukong*, the precocious primate born from a stone egg, itself formed from an ancient rock created by the coupling of Heaven and Earth. We all wanted to be Sun Wukong; my grandfather once fashioned for me the relevant headgear, and wooden staff. I was a menace; my parents were not pleased.

None of us *read* it, of course, The Journey to the West: in English translation, it runs into four volumes, totalling well over 1,500 pages. I encountered it first through a comic book adaptation, and then through various live action versions, on television and in the cinema. We all knew the stories, but never actually bothered with the texts themselves. I suspect the same can be said here in Britain, for most people, about Beowulf, and perhaps (though few might admit it) even about Shakespeare and Dickens. Certainly, from the far reaches of the empire, I saw many animated adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* long before I even knew there was a book.



John's Gospel, Gutenberg Bible.

The Qur'an and the Tao Te Ching and the "sūtras of transcendence and persuasion for good will". The Constitution. The Iliad and the Odyssey; Macbeth and Hamlet; A Christmas Carol and David Copperfield. The Journey to the West and Beowulf. The Eastenders.

How does the Bible fit in here? How is it the same as or different from these other elements of our cultural heritage and contemporary environment?

Many answers have been proposed for these questions, and in particular about the question of the Bible's uniqueness. It is, some say, uniquely accurate (and thus, ahead of its time), on matters historical and scientific, as well as theological and moral. It is, some say, uniquely written, by great patriarchs and saints, with God whispering into

their ears. Whatever the merits of these answers, it seems to me that they miss the Bible's most fundamental property, which is that it is *ours*.

The Bible is the book of the people of God, which is perhaps one way of pushing back against the claim that we are the people of the book. The uniqueness of the Bible comes from the uniqueness of the people to which it belongs, and not the other way around. It is precisely the fact that the Bible is *ours* that makes it special, because the Church is special, the Body of Christ, who is the Word of God.

The Bible is our book because—before we are Malaysian or British, before we are Chinese or European—we are the Body of Christ; thus, before the Constitution or Magna Carta, before Beowulf or The Journey to the West—this is our book. This is, of course, a very odd thing, because, of course, we are aliens, both in ancient Israel and in the Roman occupied territories. The cultural context of the Bible—both testaments, Old and New—is not ours...except by adoption. And there, here, is the key: we are, the Gentiles among us, adopted children of God, and the Bible's story is now the story in which we find ourselves. We travel not to Geatland (with Beowulf) or Ithaca (with Odysseus) or the Dahila Kingdom (with Tripitaka), but to the Promised Land and to the Cross, which in some mysterious way, turns out to be the same thing after all.

The Bible is our book, for better or for worse, not for its historical accuracy or moral clarity or literary merit, but because we have the same home. Brother Bible, sister Scripture; with these hard sayings and stories will we ever scrap and struggle, seeing in them ourselves, and each other, and—by family resemblance, by the promise that we are all of us made in God's image—we will see our Father who, in the power of the Spirit, faithfully speaks his Word.

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<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-scripture>



Suggested Discussion Questions

1. The Bible doesn't speak with one voice, but many; sometimes, the multiple voices even occur in the same text. What can we make of the *polyphony* of the biblical witness?
2. There is a long history of Christian (and Jewish) biblical interpretation. Is there a point to reading what our forebears have said about the Bible?
3. Is there such a thing as a "correct" or "wrong" interpretation of Scripture? How do we discern "good" readings from "bad" ones?