



Jewish-Christian Relations

Insights and Issues in the ongoing Jewish-Christian Dialogue



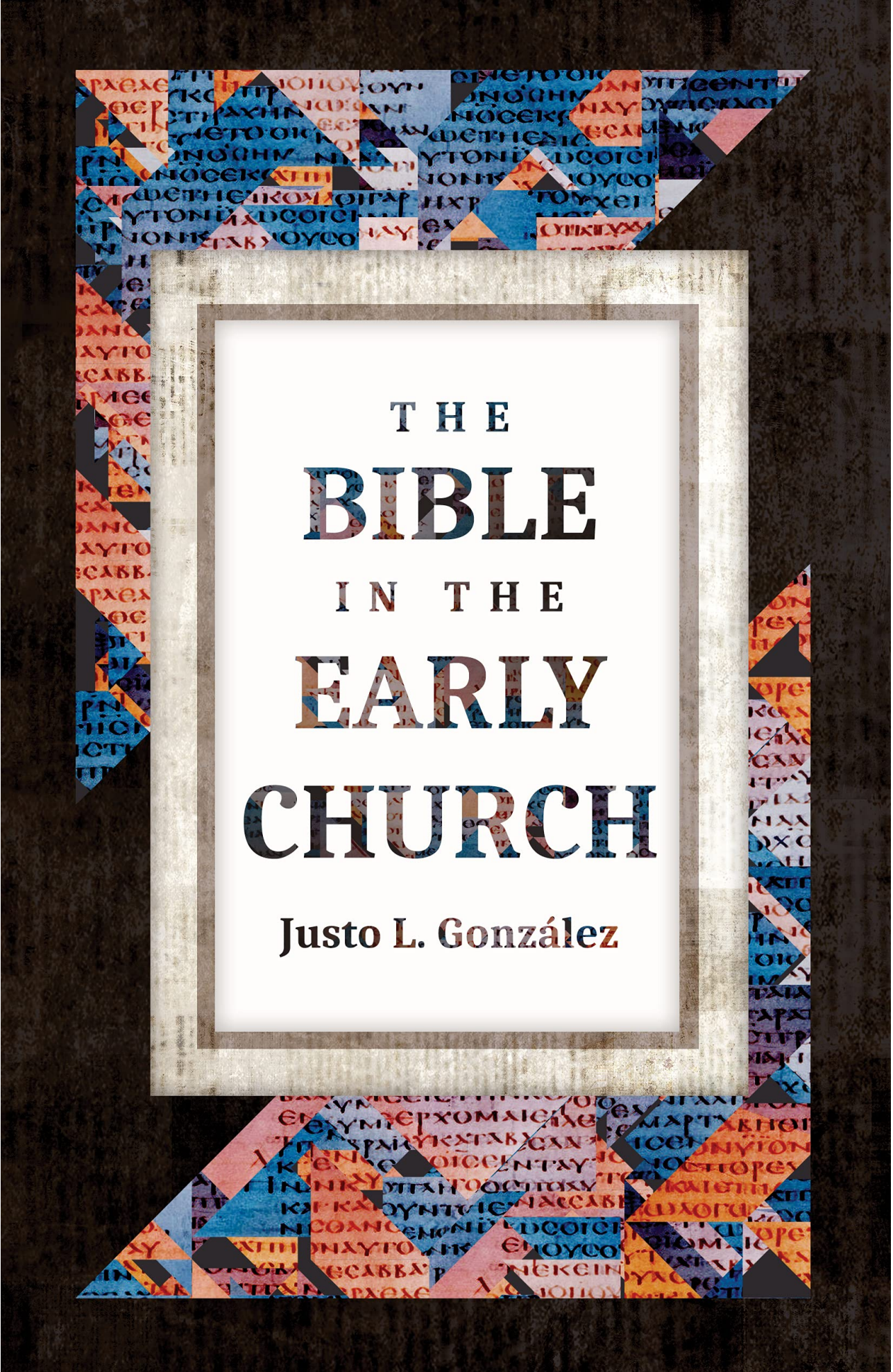
The Bible in the Early Church

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Justo L. González: The Bible in the Early Church

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THE
BIBLE
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Justo L. González

What shaped the Bible as we know it today? Justo L. González's *The Bible in the Early Church* offers readers a history of the Bible as a material artifact, a piece of technology, and a work of literature transmitted throughout millennia, tracing its complex journey into modern hands. In only 200 pages, González succeeds in the ambitious undertaking of surveying the Bible's compilation, use, and interpretation in the early church, Middle Ages, and beyond while writing both accessibly and expertly.

González divides this comprehensive primer into three primary sections. Part 1, "The Shape of the Bible," covers considerable ground as it discusses some of the technical aspects of how the Bible came to be. He examines the earliest languages, the materials on which the earliest manuscripts were written, the selection of New Testament texts, divisions of chapters and verses, generational transmission, and the overall compilation of the Bible. Though the title of his book limits González's scope to the Bible "in the early church," he nonetheless covers the profoundly significant 15th-century invention of the movable-type printing press in chapter 6. This inclusion is eminently justified, as the mass dissemination and democratization of the Bible after the invention of the Gutenberg press, which revolutionized the spread of knowledge, is a critical factor in understanding the Bible's trajectory from the early church until now. Also notable in this first section is González's treatment of the fluidity with which the earliest canon lists operated, a nod to the plethora of work currently being produced in canon studies and textuality.

In part 2, "The Use of the Bible," González discusses the various ways the Bible was used in worship settings, private devotional reading, and education, as well as to influence the social order. He rightfully notes how Christianity's birth from within Judaism profoundly shaped Christian worship; he repeats the refrain from part 1 that Scripture took on a central role in worship services, where it was read aloud, copied, and passed on (70). His chapter devoted to the Psalms reinforces this idea, showing how Christians appropriated the Psalms to read them Christocentrically. Lastly, he points to low rates of literacy, the cost and scarcity of texts, and social structures as factors that made private devotional reading rare. While much more could have been written here on the subject of literacy in antiquity alone, González traces the general contours of readership in this early period to make his point.

The third and final part, "The Interpretation of the Bible," highlights the various interpretive methods at play in the early church, especially as early Christians sought to understand the Law, Prophets, and Writings of the Hebrew Bible. González includes a helpful discussion about the dominance of typological and allegorical interpretation as the preferred method of harmonizing the Hebrew Bible with the New Testament in the patristic period and on. He then traces the way in which fundamental texts about Creation, the Exodus, and the Word were interpreted by the early church up through the medieval period. This section appears to primarily cover early Christian exegetical practices rather than outlining a history of how the Bible came to be, but nonetheless offers valuable insights into the development of biblical exegesis from Jewish models to early Christian ones.

Many volumes have been written on the history of the Bible—its compilation, transmission, and interpretation, and the complex processes of canonization—but González's addition is unique. A seasoned scholar and church historian with decades of scholarly writing to his credit, González writes lucidly and accessibly while maintaining historical veracity. He also possesses the scholarly humility to acknowledge the things that scholars simply do not know or that remain contested. As is the case with any introductory work, there are many moments when more is desired. Any number of subjects González mentions briefly (translation and reception, monks and Scripture, literacy in the early church, etc.) could warrant an entire chapter. But of course the nature of his book imposes limits.

Christians interested in the history of the Bible and its lessons for the future are most likely to engage this book, as González, a practicing Christian, invites readers to glean lessons from the

past and look forward to Christian engagement with the Bible in the future (see chapter 16). Non-confessional scholars of religion may find some of the concluding theological pronouncements unhelpful, but the approachability with which González writes will be an invaluable feature in settings like undergraduate courses. González's citation of primary sources are like salt on eggs: just enough to give flavor but not overbearing. Additionally, the helpful "Cast of Characters" at the end of the book includes brief overviews of the texts and early Christians he references, which adds great value to this thin but historically packed review.

González's erudition over many decades has contributed much to the fields of church history, theology, and biblical studies. This book is most welcome for scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in the history of the Bible's creation.

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