

The Bible: The Most Edited Book in History

By Galen Watson

Sunday, November 24th, 2019 marks the first day of National Bible Week in America, the country with the largest Christian population in, well, the entire world. Seventy-five percent of America's 318 million citizens identify as Christian. So, it comes as no surprise that the book on which Christians base their faith is celebrated with its very own week.

The 1940 brainchild of the National Bible Association, the event was designed to promote the Bible's values and encourage America to 'read the Bible in every sector of society.' The Association's mission however has yielded mixed results. Yes, the Bible is by far the bestselling book in the world, translated into over 2,000 languages.

But it's certainly the least read which is understandable because once readers encounter endless lists of genealogical begats, fashion-design minutia for Bronze-Age high priests, pages of laws about what you can't eat, wear or touch, cutting hair, bans on tattoos, body piercing and of course regulations about sex, the plot slows to a snail's pace. That seems paradoxical because those are but a few of the abominations that could get you killed. Naturally, I'm talking about the Old Testament.

The Bible is also the most interpreted, debated and disputed book and likely the least understood, as hosts of different denominations and sects with their own Bible versions attest. Many Bible readers skip ahead to the New Testament because it's more tolerant and relevant to Christians, at least modern ones. That wasn't always the case. It certainly wasn't for original Christians. The earliest—Jesus, his apostles and Judean followers—didn't have a Christian Bible. They were Jews and there wasn't one.

For them the Hebrew Bible contained the only Holy Scriptures and when they referred to the God's word they meant the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Even for unorthodox Paul of Tarsus the scriptures were the books of the Tanakh. It's pretty important to recognize what the Christian messiah, apostles and Judean followers of Christ recognized as exclusively authoritative, but it's seldom considered. In fact, the earliest list of a Christian canon is Byrennios List. Dated at about 100CE, it includes 27 Old Testament books, but not a single one from what would become the New Testament.

A few decades (of the purported fabricated false story) of the “crucifixion” of, Jesus’ followers began composing memoirs, letters and commentaries. Within a few generations there were at least forty gospels which contradicted each other and hundreds upon hundreds of letters and treatises.

Readers and listeners (most Christians were illiterate and presbyters read to their congregations) began to see certain writings as authoritative and eventually just as authoritative as the Hebrew Bible. The very different writings however presented contradictory versions of Jesus and the events of his life and teachings, depending on what a particular Christian sect believed. Ebionites, descendants of Jesus’ Jewish communities, read the Hebrew Bible.

They also read the Gospel of the Hebrews and Gospel of the Nazorenes, which no longer exist, as well as the Gospel of the Ebionites which was more or less Matthew minus the first two chapters.

On the Gentile side of the spectrum—the Greek and Roman, non-Jewish world—there were the various theologies of Gnostic Christians with their own scriptures and of course proto-orthodoxy: the theology which became the official Nicene Christianity. Most early communities followed the teachings of a single Gospel.

Anonymously written Matthew was the most popular. In Asia Minor Christians read or listened to the Gospel of John, also written by an anonymous author. Justin Martyr—one of the most prolific proto-orthodox authors of the second century—differentiated Christianity from Judaism and argued its superiority by interpreting Hebrew Scriptures with a gentile spin in Dialogue with Trypho. While he quoted from what would eventually become the four Gospels, primarily Matthew and Luke, he mentioned none by name nor any of their authors.

He simply called them “Memoirs of the Apostles.” Jesus’ words and deeds in the Memoirs gave the literature authority rather than the author’s name. Conspicuously, Justin never quoted from the Epistles of Paul and Justin seemed to have had no concept of a canon. So, who came up with idea of cobbling books together to promote a particular theology, a Bible?

As odd as it might seem, modern Christians have a heresiarch (heretic who created a heretical theology) to thank for the Bible. Marcion of Sinope, a wealthy shipbuilder from a Greek colony on the Black Sea in modern-day Turkey, traveled to Rome in 139 CE where he produced the very first canon of scripture. He paid the Christian community 200,000 sesterces for a

avored position but once they discovered his true beliefs, they refunded the cash and booted him out. Marcion believed Jesus's only true Apostle was Paul, Marcion's Greek compatriot from the Byzantine city of Tarsus, even though Paul had never met the Messiah.

So, he compiled a Bible which included ten of Paul's Epistles and a shortened, edited version of Luke, Paul's Greek follower. Marcion was virulently anti-Jewish and his theology reflected his disdain for both the Jewish God and Hebrew scriptures. Like many modern Christians, Marcion couldn't resolve the contradiction of an ill-tempered, genocidal god of the Jews with the loving god of Jesus.

So he concluded that there were two Gods: the lesser, severely judgmental demiurge of the Jews who was the god of creation and the superior loving god of Jesus. Marcion's theology spread like wildfire among gentiles. He transformed Paul into a religio-rock-star and thanks to Marcion's wizardly promotional skills and financial backing, Paul's Epistles became Roman Empire religious bestsellers.

To counter Marcion's Pauline canon, early church father, Saint Irenaeus, produced a competing version. He proclaimed there could be only four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—since there were only four points on the compass and four corners of the earth. He was also the first to claim that the Gospel of Luke was written by Paul's Greek companion and the anonymously-penned Gospel of John was written by the Apostle.

That was quite a shock to many of Irenaeus' contemporaries who didn't believe John to be the book's author or that the book was authoritative, especially since it was one of the gospels of the Gnostic heretics. John was certainly unlike the other three Synoptic Gospels and often contradicted them. Irenaeus did not include the wildly-popular Epistles of Paul in his four-fold canon.

But he wasn't above quoting them as support for his own proto-orthodox sect and to justify polemics against theologies he branded as heterodox (heresy). Perhaps Irenaeus quoted Paul often in an attempt to steal him away from Gnostic heretics. In the 2nd century, the concept of a four-fold canon was utterly novel but thanks to Marcion and Irenaeus' rock-lobbing squabble, the concept of a multi-book Bible was born.

Other Christian communities produced their own canons. The Gnostic sects had their 52 books of scripture, including the Gospel of Thomas, which many scholars assert at least part predates New Testament gospels. Certainly, half of its 114 sayings attributed to Jesus are repeated in the canonized synoptic gospels. In the eighteenth century, Italian scholar,

Ludovico Muratori, discovered a fragment of an eighth-century text in a library in Milan.

Most modern scholars and paleographers conclude the original had been written in Rome in the second half of the 2nd century. Named in honor of its discoverer, the Muratorian Canon is the first canonical list of New Testament books. Unlike the modern canon, however, the list includes the Wisdom of Solomon, Apocalypse of Peter and provisionally the Shepherd of Hermas, all of which are not in the Bible.

It excludes Hebrews, James, 1st and 2nd Peter, and one of the Epistles of John (we don't know which one). The list notably excludes Paul's Epistles to the Alexandrians and Laodiceans labeling them Marcionite forgeries. Never heard of them? It's not surprising. They aren't in the Bible and no longer exist.

But it points out that as early as the second century Christians were well aware of Epistles that claimed Paul as their author, but were actually Marcionite community forgeries. Eighty percent of modern Bible scholars consider the Pauline Epistles of 1st and 2nd Timothy, Titus, and Ephesians to be pseudepigraphic (forgeries).

They are evenly divided on Colossians and 2nd Thessalonians and virtually all conclude that Paul did not write the anonymously composed Hebrews.

By the early 4th century the many, disparate and adversarial Christian sects accounted for a mere ten percent of the Roman Empire, so it's surprising pagan Emperor Galerius ended their persecution with the Edict of Toleration. Two years later, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan.

While previously the diverse sects had been more or less united against a common enemy, with the external threat removed they turned on one another with stunning enthusiasm. The infighting often turned murderously violent, particularly in Egypt and by 325CE Emperor Constantine decided he'd had enough.

He resolved to bring the Empire's Bishops together in a great council and force them to adopt a single theology to end their factious warring. Constantine was still a pagan and virulently anti-Jewish like Marcion. He was committed to creating a new religion free from any trace of Hebrew beliefs.

Constantine placed his long-time adviser, Hosius of Cordoba—a proto-orthodox Bishop, in charge of organizing the Nicene council. Moreover, Constantine confided to Hosius that he would wear the bishops down, if necessary, by long months of debate. But at the end there would be just one theology. Further, Hosius' orthodox side would find the results most favorable.

Hosius invited about 1,800 Bishops to the great council from the western and eastern empire, but only about 300 showed up for the all-expense-paid trip to the Emperor's summer palace on the shores of Lake Ascanius—almost all of them from the east. Constantine didn't rule the west so western Christians couldn't care less about Constantine or Eastern Christianity.

Even the pope was a no-show. Attendees were about evenly divided between the proto-orthodox sect and opposing theologies: primarily Arians who believed Jesus was subordinate to god, a theology closer to the concept of the Jewish messiah. But after months of haranguing from the emperor, threats of excommunication and banishment, the Proto-orthodox sect indeed emerged the victors.

But contrary to popular belief the council did not endorse a canon. The only book mentioned was in a prologue by Saint Jerome, translator of the Greek Bible into Vulgate Latin, who wrote that the Book of Judith was “found by the Nicene Council to have been counted among the number of Sacred Scriptures.” Protestants removed Judith from the Bible during the Reformation.

Six years later, in 331CE, a still pagan Constantine took some time off from executing his military-hero son in a fit of rage and his wife as well, and excommunicating a host of priests and bishops to command Eusebius of Caesarea to produce ‘fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures,...to be written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practised in their art.’¹ The world's oldest Bibles date from that era: codex vaticanus and codex sinaiticus. Bible scholars are divided on whether they are survivors of Constantine's original fifty. If they are then the differences with the modern canon, both additions and deletions, are large and surprising.

While Eusebius of Caesarea was busy compiling the scriptures according to Constantine's order, he must have given a lot of thought to which books should be included and just as much to those that shouldn't. In his *Historia*

Ecclesiastica or Church History, Eusebius coined the term antilegomena: disputed writings or literally works that are “spoken against.” In the ‘disputed’ group he included James, Jude, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John and the Apocalypse of John (Revelation).

Writings that would never find their way into the Bible would be those penned by Arius, the presbyter at the center of the Council of Nicaea controversy. Why? Because Emperor Constantine ordered their complete destruction, insured by the death penalty for any who refused to surrender Arian writings:

“In addition, if any writing composed by Arius should be found, it should be handed over to the flames, so that not only will the wickedness of his teaching be obliterated, but nothing will be left even to remind anyone of him. And I hereby make a public order, that if someone should be discovered to have hidden a writing composed by Arius, and not to have immediately brought it forward and destroyed it by fire, his penalty shall be death. As soon as he is discovered in this offence, he shall be submitted for capital punishment...” — Edict of Emperor Constantine.

Imagine if you will that a pagan Roman emperor held such sway over 4th-century Christians that he could manipulate the content of the Bible and what would become lawful Christian doctrine. As a result, no writings by Arius exist today and Arians were fully half of the attendees at Nicaea!

It was not until the year 367 CE that Bishop Athanasius—a proto-orthodox, sectarian gang leader and Nicene firebrand—composed an Easter Letter which included the very first written list of the 27 Bible books that appear in the modern New Testament. So was that the end? Had the New Testament finally been set in stone?

Not on your life. Sixteenth century founder of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, referenced Eusebius’ antilegomena as he tried to remove the books of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Other protestant leaders disagreed. Nevertheless, Luther placed the books at the end of the Bible to emphasize their debatable authenticity. They remain there today in the German version of the Protestant Bible.

Meanwhile in England, during the reign of Henry VIII, scholar William Tyndale published his own translation of the Bible into English. His version was not only England's first printed Bible, but also the basis for the Church of England's first authorized Bible. Tyndale greatly admired his contemporary, Martin Luther, as well as the German reformation.

In a nod to Luther, Tyndale editorialized the Greek word *ekklesia* to mean congregation instead of church and *presbuteros* became elder instead of priest. His controversial choices had a dramatic effect on English readers. Brits who read his version of the Bible with the changed meanings found no foundation for the Catholic Church or ironically the Church of England.

New sects that placed authority of individual congregations over a centralized church spread like wildfire. There were Ranters, Muggletonians, Anabaptists, Philadelphians, Diggers, Grinletonians, Quakers, Brownists, Calvinists and many more, and of course the dour Puritans. These religious sects became collectively known as English Dissenters or Separatists: Britain's version of the Protestant Reformation.

In response to Luther's reformation and Henry VIII's Church of England, the Catholic Church convened what became known as the counter-reformation with the Council of Trent: five sessions between 1545 and 1563. The council condemned Protestant 'heresies,' and declared Saint Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation the official Catholic canon. They commissioned a standard version which was completed in 1590. So that should have been it, the end—two canonized versions of the Bible. Right? Not by a long shot.

One of the fledgling English protestant sects, the sourpuss Puritans—the same ones that cancelled Christmas in England and America, hanged witches and clapped sinners in stocks—protested that the Reformation had not thoroughly purged the 'errors' of Roman Catholicism from the Church of England. And, greatly influenced by Tyndale's editorialized re-translation they objected to the word priest.

They had many other demands but most of all, Puritans insisted on yet a new version of the Bible in the vernacular using words they preferred. So King James commissioned an 'Authorised Version' which is commonly called the King James Bible. The work was assigned to 47 scholars, divided into six committees.

All were members of the Church of England and all were clergymen except one, and every committee had members with Puritan predispositions. One would think the King James Bible should have been an accurate translation

of the earliest scriptures, albeit with a Church of England and Puritan spin. Right?

Not so fast. The commission relied mostly on a translation by Dutch priest and classical scholar, Desiderius Erasmus, which was fraught with errors. Erasmus relied on the 'most faulty' Greek manuscripts to create his early 16th century Textus Receptus, because he only had access to twelfth century Byzantine manuscripts rather than the earliest third- and fourth-century ones.

Nine hundred years of scribe's additions, deletions, alterations and forged passages were the basis of Erasmus' version and he bemoaned, 'the facts cry out, and it can be clear, as they say, even to a blind man, that often the true and genuine reading has been corrupted by ignorant scribes,... or altered by scribes who are half-taught and half-asleep.'

Even worse, Erasmus hurried to beat a competitor to publication and lamented that his version was 'rushed into print rather than edited.' Is it any wonder there are so many changes in the newest translations? Nevertheless the King's Printer, Robert Barker, published the King James Bible in 1611. It sold for ten shillings and is considered by many Protestants to be the 'inerrant word of God.'

So is it finished now? Finally? Is the official version of the Bible complete? Hardly. There are over 200 versions of the Bible in English alone! Even today, after centuries of changes, many scholars still question the doubtful authenticity of various Bible books as well as contradictory differences between the synoptic gospels and Gospel of John.

There are debates about noticeable differences between Jesus' doctrine and Paul's: Jesus preached tolerance and forgiveness while Paul is seen as bringing the sword of judgment, intolerance and misogyny. Thomas Jefferson noticed the incongruities and opined that Paul was the "first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus."

We see the same division in modern American Christianity with intolerant, intransigent Evangelicals, Fundamentalists and Catholic conservatives who quote Paul's fire and brimstone while moderate Christians embrace Jesus' doctrine of inclusion, forgiveness, and acceptance. The dissimilar theology is so pronounced, one might ask whether the Bible canon's end result is truly Christianity or the heretic Marcion's Paulianity.

And what of the original Christian theology, the one practiced by Jesus' Apostles and their followers in Judean communities? They weren't around

to dispute or authenticate what became the canonized Bible. Nor could they dispute early proto-orthodox Christians like Ireneus who pronounced them heretics. Why?

They were long dead, wiped off the face of the earth in the holocaust of the 1st- and 2nd-century Jewish-Roman wars that razed the Temple, leveled Jerusalem and annihilated Jewish society in Judea.

So if you plan to join the festivities during National Bible week in America or anywhere else, there's a lot to ponder. But more than that, there are many, many Bible versions past and present to choose from. It's far too easy to cavalierly say my version is the only true version or the best translation or even the "inerrant word of God" without knowing where it came from and certainly whose interests it served.

1. Eusebius of Caesaria, Vita Constantini, Life of Constantine

Allah Knows Best.