Book Review An American Bible

An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880 by Paul C. Gutjahr, Standford University Press, Standford, CA: 1999, 256, ISBN: 978-0-8047-4339-6. \$12.00.

Paul Gutjahr has written a history of the English Bible in America from 1777 to 1880. The book consists of: acknowledgements, table of contents, list of figures, preface, five chapters, postscript, six appendixes, notes, bibliography and an index.

The five chapters cover: production, packaging, purity, pedagogy, and the popularity of the Bible.

Gutjahr reveals insights into the status of the Bible in America from the time of the Revolutionary War until the end of the nineteenth century covering a period of a little more than one hundred years. In the Preface, he gives reasons for the erosion of the Bible's preeminence in America during the nineteenth century. Consider the following quote: "As the nineteenth century unfolded, radical changes in printing technology, educational practices, reading tastes, transportation networks, labor relations, demographics, political institutions, and religious traditions combined to erode the Bible's "classic preeminence." (2). Gutjahr references Grant Wacker's assessment that the Bible's preeminence was abated due to the educated theological elite of the late nineteenth century where influences from German biblical criticism (both higher criticism and lower criticism) changed the view that the Bible was a divine document to the view that the Bible was both a human and divine document (2). By the 1920's and 1930's the Bible was no longer the basis of America's ethos and American culture was less aware of, less interested in and less convinced by the Scriptures. The Bible went from being The Book to being one book among many and the Bible went from being the only divine Book to being a book primarily human in origin. Gutjahr goes on to say, "This study argues that the reasons for the diminishing role of the Bible in American print culture are largely founded and revealed in the evolving content and packaging of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible's myriad mutations played an enormous, and hitherto almost entirely ignored, role in determining the Bible's place in American hearts and minds" (3). By 1880, nearly two thousand different editions of the Bible were available to Americans (3). The multiplication of the Bible in America was designed to keep it the most read, most revered book, but it may have had just the opposite effect. It divided loyalties between various versions and texts which caused competition, confusion and disillusionment with the "unchangeable" nature of the Bible.

In chapter one, Gutjahr examines the production and distribution of the Bible. He focuses on the work of the American Bible Society begun in 1816 on placing a Bible in every American home. The principle idea was that by making the Bible the most accessible book, it could also make it the most influential. This strategy led to the production of thousands of Bibles, but it also created massive diversification of Bible editions through competition. This, in turn, led to the loss of the "unchangeableness" of the Bible. In chapter one, Gutjahr introduces another factor in

the demise of the preeminence of the Bible in America—the rise of secular humanism. By the time of the American revolution, printed material became a means of mass persuasion. Printing businesses multiplied as the demand for reading materials rose. Thomas Paine's Common Sense sold 120,000 copies in its first year (April, 1776). It is estimated that five times as many people read the pamphlet (10). This was a clear threat to the Bible. Paine wrote The Age of Reason in 1794. In it, Paine claims that the Bible is more "the word of a demon, than the word of God" and "a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind" (10). Gutjahr relates that men such as Elias Boudinot attempted to answer Paine. Boudinot, in 1816, at the age of 75, became the president of the American Bible Society. Boudinot was the first president of the Continental Congress and served with George Washington at Valley Forge (9). He wrote, *The Age of Revelation*, to answer Paine, in 1801. Paine's book sold 100,000 copies in 1797 alone. Boudinot's reply sold probably less than 2,000 copies (10-11). Boudinot was determined to defeat the humanism of Paine by multiplying copies of the Bible. The American Bible Society developed a plan to obtain the goal of placing Bibles in every home in America. The plan was called the General Supply. Four such supplies occurred in the nineteenth century. The General Supply of 1829-1831 produced over one-half million volumes of scripture for distribution. Gutjahr examines two individuals who had an impact on the publication of the Bible in America before the ABS. They are Robert Aitken and Matthew Carey. Aitken published the first English New Testament in the colonies in 1777 (20-21). In 1782, he set type and printed 10,000 copies of the entire Bible. This was a significant undertaking for his day and time. However, the end of the Revolutionary War led to the importation of Bibles from abroad and those Bibles were sold cheaper than Aitkens. This resulted in Aitken's financial ruin. Three years after Aitken released his Bible, Matthew Carey opened a printing shop in Philadelphia. Carey would become a dominant force in American publishing for the next 30 years. In 1790, Carey printed 471 copies of the Catholic Douay Bible. In 1801, Carey printed his first Bible. Between 1801 and 1824, Carey brought out over sixty Bible editions and dominated the market (28). Carey pioneered mass Bible production and distribution in the early part of the nineteenth century. A change was coming. In 1812, the Philadelphia Bible Society acquired stereotyped plates from England for a Bible edition, and printed the first stereotyped book in America (29). Stereotyping revolutionized American book publishing in the early part of the nineteenth century and the Bible was greatly affected by this invention. No publisher more enthusiastically embraced this type of printing than the American Bible Society. The American Bible Society was also among the first to employ power presses. By 1829, Daniel Fanshaw was operating sixteen Treadwell steam powered presses exclusively for the printing needs of the Society (30). No American publisher could match the volume of production of the Society. Interestingly, the Society had adopted a policy of no notes or comments in any of the Bibles that they printed. It brought binding in house and was able to sell books already bound. It produced a modest product at an inexpensive cost.

Chapter two addresses packaging of the Bible. Gutjahr opens this chapter with a historical analysis of the role the Bible played in the inauguration of George Washington. The Bible was used to solemnize and authenticate the oath taken by the first president of the United States. The Constitution does not require the physical

presence of a Bible for taking the oath of office for the president. The Bible served as a cultural icon and its presence seemed to somehow sanctify the oath of office. Washington placed his right hand on the Bible when he took the oath and afterwards, he kissed the place where it had been randomly opened—Genesis 49 and 50 (41). Gutjahr mentions that during the ceremony, the Bible was never actually read or quoted. Yet, its presence conveyed meaning to those who witnessed the ceremony.

Gutjahr affirms that the Bible physical packaging became a powerful means of accenting both the importance and trustworthiness of the Bible's message. The competition spawned by the American Bible Society ushered in an era of elaborately decorated Bibles. The text was accompanied with complex commentaries, luxurious illustrations and ornate bindings (41). The packaging also had the perverse effect of contradicting or de-emphasizing the sacred words it was intended to highlight (41).

Before the 1820's, books were sold mostly unbound and the purchaser would either have the printer bind the book or take it to a bookbinder to have it done. During the 1820's, this practice was altered. Books were printed and bound in a variety of different bindings. Cloth became a cheaper and more accessible form of binding. Yet, ninety-two percent of the American-produced English Bibles in the American Bible Society collection of Bibles were still bound in leather throughout the 1840's (43). The majority of Bibles continued to be bound in leather throughout the 1860's. The type of bindings became more elaborate. There was a cultural connection between the Bible's content and its cover. Also, the Bible was given a prominent place in the home's of those who owned them. Often displayed in the parlor, the presence of the Bible openly displayed in the home conveyed meaning without expressing the content of the Bible. The home became an extension of the church where spiritual growth could occur. The home was a place where moral development could and should occur. The Bible had a role to play in this development. A virtuous citizenry produced a virtuous country. In order for this to occur, the contents of the Bible had to be mixed with faith in them that read or heard it.

Illustrations were important aspects of a Bible's packaging. Gutjahr demonstrates this with examples from Bibles produced by Isaiah Thomas and Matthew Carey. Thomas printed his folio Bible in 1791. Benjamin Franklin hailed it as the most beautiful book ever printed in America (48). The Bible contained fifty copperplate illustrations. These were done in the ornate rococo style (48-49). Some of these illustrations were criticized because, in the rococo style, women's breasts were portrayed and this was thought to stimulate less virtuous appetites. This only demonstrates that pictures do not contain a single, readily apparent message. Gutjahr points out the in some of Carey's Bibles, the illustrations go beyond the biblical text and are filled with curiosities and objectionable scenes (58-59). The illustrations were spaced out in a way that permitted the reader to skip the reading content and focus on the visual content (59). The Bible's core message did not reach the reader without some form of material mediation. This mediation had an effect on the interpretation of the text.

Gutjahr examines the editions of the Bible produced by John Holbrook in Brattleboro, Vermont (60). Between 1816 and 1852, forty-two editions of the bibles were published by eight different firms associated with Holbrook. Holbrook mastered the use of illustrations in his Bible editions. He introduced linking the biblical text with

contemporary travels and archaeological excavations in Egypt and Palestine (60). In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, American theological scholarship began to feel the first influences of European biblical criticism. This higher criticism attacked the accuracy of various portions of Scripture. The historicity of the Bible became all important. Two men, William Thomson and Edward Robinson were instrumental in efforts to shore up the Biblical text by connecting the Bible to the Holy Land. Both men wrote books connecting Bible texts with the actual lands where the events took place. Thomson wrote, *The Land and the Book* and Robinson wrote, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and Later Biblical Researches in Palestine*. Biblical illustrations of the Holy Land were incorporated into Bibles. Brattleboro Bibles produced in the 1830s are examples of this effort. The Holy Land became a topographical apologetic for the Bible and illustrations of it were incorporated in many Bibles to generate greater confidence in the text.

Gutjahr includes in this section of the book a discussion of the impressive *Illuminated Bible* of the 1840s published by Harper and Brothers. The volume became known as the most spectacular book ever printed in the United States (70). The Bible contained over sixteen hundred illustrations. It was the first Bible produced with electrotyping which was a process that permitted large runs at high speeds on high-pressure presses (70). Though unsurpassed in the shear volume of illustrations, these same illustrations served to compete with the written text of the Bible.

The final section of this chapter is devoted to the influence of the railroads on the marketing and distribution of Bibles in the latter half of the nineteenth century as well as the canvassing activities of subscription-only publishing firms who utilized them. One of the most prominent firms using this new marketing approach was the National Publishing Company founded by J. R. Jones. In 1863, Jones produced at least a dozen English Bible editions and sold them using the subscription-only method of sales (77). In 1880, an edition by M. R. Gately & Co., a publishing house associated with J. R. Jones, known as the Gately Edition, boasted 100,000 Marginal References and Readings and Nearly Two Thousand Illustrative Engravings (79). The book contained a dictionary of the Bible and a history of the books of the Bible. These Bibles were large family Bibles that resembled Bible encyclopedias. The goal was to support the biblical text with supplemental materials that also enhanced its value and truthfulness to the reader.

Gutjahr explores the purity of the Bible in chapter three. He opens with a reference to the Standard Bible crisis of 1858. The American Bible Society undertook the task of standardizing the text of the Bible by a comparisons of the Bible's in its own collection. Differences in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and chapter headings were the cause of constant vexation. The Society's newly revised text released in 1851 produced a firestorm. Critic after critic denounced its revisions. By 1858, the American Bible Society returned to the King James Versions they had previously published. Those who worked on the standardized text revolted and left the Society. Many people did not want the King James Bible altered. However, in the late 1840s, a much larger translation debate began and lasted until the release of the Revised Version of the 1880s. The 1850s saw many religious bodies debating over updating the King James Version. They desired to update the language. Others were pushing to update the Greek text that underlies the English translations. Textual criticism began with Johann

Griesbach before 1800. Gradually, his work and that of others grew until a new Greek text was born in 1881 and produced by Westcott and Hort. Gutjahr gives a brief history of the English Bible beginning with John Wycliffe and ending with the King James Version. He gives two primary reasons as to why people pushed for new versions. First, people wanted a Bible in their own common vernacular. Second, they wanted a Bible based on the latest information concerning the most up-to-date manuscript evidence.

Gutjahr records the efforts of Charles Thomson who began his translation work in 1789. Thomson sought to establish credibility for the Bible by translating the Septuagint into English. He felt that since Jesus and the apostles used the Septuagint, that it would be the best source for showing the Messianic prophecies and their fulfillment. Thompson, Gutjahr points out, was interested in *first texts* and *first meanings*. Thompson argued that the Septuagint was closer in proximity to the biblical events and so less subject to historical error. He also sought the historical meaning of biblical words and phrases (94). Thompson fashioned a Bible that he hoped would make the biblical message more credible by the use of more ancient texts and the use of common idiom. He paved the way for Bible translators for the next seventy years.

Gutjahr indicates that Abner Kneeland was the second American English Bible translator. Kneeland was a Universalist. He was the first of seven Bible translators with Unitarian leanings. Together, these translators produced nearly a third of all new Bible translations published in the United States before 1880 (95). He released The New Testament in Greek and English in 1823. Unitarians did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity and so attacked the accuracy of the biblical texts upon which it was based. They argued that all verses showing an affinity to the doctrine of the Trinity were later additions to the most ancient biblical manuscripts (96). Many of these Unitarians taught at Harvard Divinity School and their academic credentials gave credence to their words. Kneeland used the Greek text of Johann Griesbach which he incorporated into his diglot translation placing the Greek text on the left side of the page and the English translation on the right side of the page. Griesbach attempted to comprise a Greek text that was more accurate than the Received Text which was used primarily before this time as the basis for English translations. His Greek text was printed in America in 1809 by William Wells. It was the result of studying over four hundred manuscript sources—some dating back six centuries earlier than the ones used for the Received Text (98). Griesbach represented the most current German biblical scholarship on the text of the New Testament and applied principles of textual criticism and historical analysis to the text. While Kneeland adopted for the most part the translation of English Unitarian Thomas Belsham whose version was printed in London in 1808, he made changes that were significant. The most significant was the transliteration of the Greek word aion instead of translating it everlasting or eternal. He brought the word over into English with the word aionion. Kneeland believed the word meant for an age instead of everlasting or eternal. As a Universalist, he did not believe in eternal punishment. He made the translation fit his beliefs. Kneeland had longed struggled with doubts about the authenticity of scripture and these led him into an ill-defined pantheism that made him the center of Massachusetts's last public trial for the crime of blasphemy. He was found guilty and spent sixty days in jail in Boston (99).

The 1880s saw the discovery of new manuscripts: Codex Sinaiiticus, and the

Codex Vaticanus. Also, new Greek Testaments by Karl Lachmann (1831), Constantin von Tischendorf (eight editions between 1841 and 1872), Samuel Tregelles (six-part edition between 1857 and 1872), and Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort (1881) (99). With these new Greek texts came the push for "improved" translations based on them. Concern for the Greek text was one thing, accurately translating it into English was guite another. Griesbach insisted upon translation that reflected the author's original intent based upon philology, grammar, immediate context and remote context. This involved both the textual and historical context. Accurate Greek words had to be translated with accurate English equivalents (100). This quest for accuracy in translation was evident in the translation of the Greek word baptizo. Gutjahr indicates that Alexander Campbell was the first American to seek such clarity in a Bible translation in his New Testament of 1826 (101). Campbell translated the word with the English word *immersion* in nearly every instance of *baptizo* in the Greek New Testament. This set off the largest translation battle in early nineteenth century America (103). Campbell changed the format of the version he produced and updated the language it contained to reflect more modern usage. He based his translation on the work of Johann Griesbach believing this Greek text to be more accurate than the Received Text. Yet, Campbell did not push his version as a substitute for the King James. Later, he would translate the book of Acts for the American Bible Union translation and use the Received Text. Campbell's version was the best selling Bible translation by an individual prior to the Revised Version (105).

Gutjahr indicates the problems that arose with Bible Versions that were sectarian in nature. He calls it sectarianism through Bible translation (106). He mentions the Unitarians (illustrated previously by Kneeland), the Adventists (Nathan Whiting's New Testament of 1849), the Mormons (Joseph Smith Jr.'s translation 1867), and the Baptists (Adoniram Judson's controversy with the American Bible Society over the word immersion). The American Bible Society refused to publish Judson's work because he used the word immersion for baptism. The ABS argued that they would not publish a translation that did not conform to the common English version (KJV). This tied the ABS to a translation that was increasingly coming under scholarly attack. This led many Baptist groups to withdraw from the ABS and start The American and Foreign Bible Society (107). The American and Foreign Bible Society began with the idea of publishing more accurate translations, but resisted efforts to revise the King James Bible. In 1850, Spencer Cone and William Wyckoff offered a more complete revision of the King James and were rebuffed. This led them to break away from the Amercian and Foreign Bible Society and begin the American Bible Union (108). The American Bible Union was committed to publishing an immersion Bible, but was also dedicated to revising the some twenty-four thousand errors of the King James Version (108). The American Bible Union released its version in 1863, but it was not widely accepted. No American or British version even appeared to threaten the position of the Kings James Bible before 1880.

In 1881, the New Testament Revised Version and in 1885, the entire Bible Revised Version was published. This was the result of sixty-seven British scholars and thirty-four American scholars headed by Philip Schaff who were involved in the revision work. The new translation was met with enthusiasm initially, but eventually only obtained about five to ten percent of the Bible market. Gutjahr states, "In one fell

swoop, the introduction of the Revised Version gave credibility to doubts about the trustworthiness of the bible, while it loosened the grip of the King James Bible—a book one author called "the highest bond of unity for the English race." (110-111). This opened the door for new versions to follow in the twentieth century.

In chapter four, Gutjahr examines the diminishing role of the Bible in public schools. The first area of consideration is the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in America. By the end of the 1840s, the number of immigrants flowing into the United States doubled (113). These were primarily German and Irish immigrants who were largely Catholic. American Catholicism would grow throughout the nineteenth century until it became the largest religious denomination by 1890 (113). The tensions between Protestants and Catholics took their most violent forms in New York, Baltimore, Boston and Philadelphia where the foreign-born sometimes comprised over half the city population by 1850. In 1844, Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick of the Philadelphia diocese requested that the city's Board of Controllers for public schools permit Catholic children to use their own version of the Bible in schools and be excused from all other religious instruction (116). The Board agreed. However, some misunderstood the Board's decision as one that banned all Bibles. Protestants rallied to support the use of the Bible in public schools. Tensions increased until violence broke out. Eventually, the Philadelphia militia and the governor had to intervene to stop the bloodshed. "American Catholics helped lay the foundation for displacing the Bible as America's most commonly read text by challenging the role of the religious sectarianism in the country's public schools" (118).

At the time of the American Revolution, the Bible was the primary source of reading material in the schools. However, this gradually began to change as new books were introduced that could teach children to read. Some of the most significant were Thomas Dilworth's, *A New Guide to the English Tongue*; Noah Webster's grammar, and the McGuffey Reader which sold some estimated forty-seven million copies between 1836 and 1870 (119). State's such as Massachusetts, under the leadership of Horace Mann (president of the school board from 1837 to 1848) worked hard to ban religious reading material from school curricula in an attempt to keep sectarianism out of the classroom (119). Mann's work in Massachusetts spread to state after state. Mann, however, believed that the Bible played an important role in the classroom. He supported devotional reading of the Bible which he felt would allow the Bible to speak for itself without advancing a particular sectarian view. It also allowed the Bible to influence the development of moral virtue.

However, Catholics would not use the Protestant Bible. Catholics did not accept the King James Version of the Bible because it did not hold the imprimatur of the Catholic Church and because reading it "without note or comment" instilled in Catholic children the belief that private interpretation was acceptable (121-122). Gutjahr relates the history of the McClay Bill in New York that resulted in the secularization of classroom instruction throughout New York (125).

Catholic versions of the Scripture were not in demand. Matthew Carey published the first Catholic Bible in America in 1790. In over a decade after this, no publisher undertook to print a Catholic Bible. Matthew Carey continued to print the Catholic Bible. In 1825, a growing number of editions of the Catholic Bible were produced in the United States and by the 1850s thirty- nine new editions of the

Catholic Scriptures were produced by seven different American publishers (126). Catholic Bibles differed from Protestant Bibles in several different ways: Catholic Bibles had to be based on the Latin Vulgate, and the Vulgate edition contained the Apocrypha that Protestants did not accept as canonical. For American Catholics adherence to all of the books of the Vulgate meant a commitment by Church law to the Rheims/Douay Version, the vernacular translation of the Vulgate (127). Gutjahr includes several examples of pages from various Catholic Bibles (128-137). As Gutjahr brings this section to a conclusion, he remarks, "A stronger conception of the separation of church and state, coupled with a receding notion of the United States as a Protestant country, would lay the foundation for the ultimate recision of bible reading in the American classroom and other public institutions" (141).

The final chapter in the book, chapter five, looks at how a number of authors, publishers, and clergymen began transforming the Bible's story into less sacred forms of print to turn American readers once again to the Bible (5). Gutjahr addresses the rise of religious fiction in books like Paul Wright's The New and Complete Life of our Blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ which went through fourteen printings between 1785 to 1818 and Lew Wallace's Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1880) (147). These books represented the effort to bring the Bible to life, but they had their drawbacks. They were sometimes inaccurate historically or they incorporated imagination and literary license to dramatize the story and give it greater effect. Gutjahr references Joseph Smith Jr.'s The Book of Mormon as the most audacious rendering of Christ's life to appear in the nineteenth century (151). Smith placed Jesus in America instead of the usual surroundings of Judea. He developed an imaginative story in a 600 page book which imitated the language of the King James Version. The story was completely contrived by Smith who claimed that he had translated it from golden plates which he had discovered which related to him a long-lost story of Christian history (152). Gutjahr analyzes the effect of other religious books on the biblical narrative itself. He also examines the effect of Charles Darwin's writings on the Bible. Darwin challenged the truthfulness of the Bible's record of origins. His work helped create the separation of science from the Bible giving science its autonomy and putting religion beyond its reach (168). Gutjahr, at the same time, considers the work of Auguste Comte's epistemological theories of causality which married well with Darwin's concepts of natural selection and gave credence to the theory of evolution. Wallace's book, Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, served as a Christian apologetic which emphasized emotion over logic and appealed to the heart rather than the head. Although the book proved extremely popular and was made into a movie, Gutjahr states that it was a book written about Jesus, but largely without Jesus (171). The effect of the novel seemed counter to its intended purpose. Rather than draw people to the Bible, it took the place of the Bible and pushed it to the periphery of American print culture. People could easily be entertained by reading a novel and at the same time avoid engaging the Bible itself in all of its complexity.

In the Postscript, Gutjahr gives his own point of view regarding the changing role of the Bible in American culture. While there were many significant factors that brought about the diminishing role of the Bible in American society, Gutjahr has emphasized that the "diversification of the country's print marketplace and the Bible editions themselves" played an important role. The explosive growth in Bible editions and

productions had several consequences. First, the multiplication of Bible editions made a special book less special. "At its core, the American mass production of bibles and the resultant diversity of biblical editions highlighted the mutable nature of a supposedly immutable book" (176). After noting that nearly 2,000 editions of the English Bible had been produced, Gutjahr states, "These different editions, with their varying translations, illustrations, commentaries, formats, and bindings contributed to the notion that the Bible—far from being an unmediated, unchanging text produced by the hand of God—was a human production, open to the failings inherent in any work wrought by human hands" (176). Second, different bindings and biblical illustrations helped create bibles that were purchased for reasons other than the sacred words that they contained. Images replaced text thus de-emphasizing the text. Third, the diverse Bible editions influenced the development and functioning of important national institutions. Religious traditions such as the Unitarians, Mormons, and Disciples of Christ used their own biblical translations to distinguish and validate their beliefs (177). Catholics and Protestants used different Bibles and brought this division to bear on public schools and courts ultimately laying the foundation for the Bible's diminishing role in the schools. This, in Gutjahr's words, resulted in "depriving the nation of a textual anchor for shared cultural memory and communication" (177). Finally, the growth in publishing created an environment that helped drown out the Bible's "written preaching" in a deluge of print noise (177). The Bible faced unprecedented competition. It was no longer at the center of America's print culture. Gutjahr concludes this Postscript by noting how all of these facts affect the doctrine of "Sola Scripture" (the Scriptures alone). When the Bible is put into print, it is judged not only by its content, but by its method of conveyance (178).

Gutjahr includes six appendixes at the end of the book. The first one is an overview of Bible production in the United States from 1770 to 1880. The second one takes a look at the American Bible Society production and distribution from 1818 to 1880. In the third appendix, Gutjahr gives prices for the cheapest editions of American Bibles in the nineteenth century. The fourth appendix surveys the bindings of Bibles from the American Bible Society. Appendix five lists the new translations of the English Bible in the United States from 1808 to 1880. The final appendix examines the production of Catholic Bibles published in English in the United States from 1790 to 1880.

The book concludes with reference materials including: notes, bibliography and an index.