

An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880.
By Paul C. Gutjahr. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999. Xv, 256
pp. \$39.50. ISBN 0-8047-3425-9.

Seldom does one encounter such a fascinating book as this one. Well researched, clearly and engagingly written, it breaks new ground concerning the production of Bibles and the interaction of the Bible with social and cultural currents of the time. The text is enhanced with 45 illustrations mostly from various Bibles, and these are conveniently placed at the places where they relate to the discussion in the text (and not all gathered at the center of the book as often happens). The author is Assistant Professor of English and American Studies at Indiana University.

The author's purpose in this work is to provide "answers for the drift of the Bible from the center of America's print culture . . . [which] reasons for such a drift are incredibly complex" (p. 1). His thesis is "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" (p. 3). In the book's five chapters the author examines the aspects of production, formatting and presentation, distribution, and reception as they relate to the attempt to keep the Bible preeminent in American society during the period from 1777 (the first American edition of an English New Testament) to 1880 (the American Revised Version).

People involved in the discussion include Matthew Carey, Isaiah Thomas, Charles Thomson, Robert Aitken, Alexander Campbell, Joseph Smith, Lew Wallace, Adoniram Judson, and Charles Darwin. Topics discussed include the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, stereotyping, the importance of maps (to bring the Holy Land to the American people and to serve as an apologetic for the accuracy of the Scripture), the evolution of notes and illustrations attached to the biblical text (the Harper Illuminated Bible of 1846 contained more than 1,600 illustrations), the significance of elaborate bindings, and the ramifications of fictionalized Bible stories. The author shows how these began to topple the text of the Bible from its central place in American life and how they kept people from having to grapple with the biblical text itself.

Of special interest is the author's discussion of the jockeying of various translations for acceptance (there being 35 new translations by 1880) as well as the competition between Protestant and Roman Catholic translations. Too, his discussion of the establishing and funding of parochial schools in the 1870s and the debates and court cases over the use of the Bible in public schools are outstanding. For example, in the 1870s the Supreme Court of Ohio ruled to forbid the practice of reading a portion of the Bible at the beginning of each school day (pp. 137-40). In 1890 the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled similarly on the basis of separation of church and state (pp. 140-41). Contemporary life seems to be repeating some of these pieces of history.

This excellent book has certainly demonstrated why the Bible moved away from being “the center of American print culture.” The reasons, admirably supported by the research, are four (according to the author’s summary postscript, pp. 175-78). (1) Factors (machine made paper, steam presses, bindings) that came together about the same time increased production of the Bible and also made it a less special book. (2) Multiplied illustrations, annotations and other helps, drew attention away from the biblical text itself, while possession of elaborate bindings showed off the social status of the owner rather than emphasizing the text. (3) Different translations were used to promote different religious traditions resulting in battles in the public arena (e.g., in the school systems). (4) Other religious material (e.g., Ben-Hur) diverted people’s interest and study of the Bible itself. A fifth might have been given more attention; namely, the influence of Darwin and Comte in separating science and religion (discussed briefly on pages 167-68).

The historical lessons of this book could well be heeded by the present generation, for “what goes around comes around.”

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