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# Review of Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880*

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## AN AMERICAN BIBLE

Paul C. Gutjahr. *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999. Illustrated. 256 pp. \$39.50.

The introductory note encapsulates the premise and problems with which *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* grapples. Gutjahr writes: "The Bible is a unique book in Western Culture, reflected by the frequent capitalization of the word Bible in general usage. I differ slightly from this practice—by capitalizing the word *Bible* only when I refer to the work itself, but not when I speak of bibles collectively" (xiii).

The dilemma posed by this editorial note signals the dilemma of how to discuss a sacred text with a genuine sense of its multiplicity, its collectivity, and its role as medium for that which many consider unrepresentable—faith itself. In his attempts to shape a coherent sense of how Americans have trafficked in the Good Book, Gutjahr tackles the history of what in many ways undergirds all debates over the canon in American literary culture: what was common about a common text and how did Americans repeatedly try to personalize and individuate a text that was supposedly all-encompassing? And even more powerfully, Gutjahr's questions assess what was at stake in understanding the very relationship between God's word, textual transmission, and the ways in which Biblical texts force confrontation of what Derridians might call undecideability. Are variant texts good or bad? Right or wrong? God's word or sacrilege? Is it profane to disrupt the binarism of these questions?

Gutjahr's careful series of case studies in the history of American biblical production chronicle the way in which American culture became itself more dependent upon divergent ideas and less and less upon shared texts. He points out, for instance, that broad familiarity with the text of the King James Bible "gave the United States a shared text from which to speak and anchor a common memory. Lincoln could call the nation away from being a 'house divided,' and Frederick Douglass could characterize his life as 'weeping near the rivers of Babylon' because such terminology had deep resonance with vast segments of the American population" (141). This kind of observation is hardly new, but Gutjahr's contextualization of the history of public school decisions over which kind of bible would be taught in American classrooms reminds us most forcefully how the common language of the King James Bible was under siege even in Douglass's and Lincoln's time. Indeed, Gutjahr's study offers a compelling example of how book history can force us to examine the role of textual meaning itself for the modern age. As a common biblical discourse recedes in American culture, have we supplemented it with an awareness of the sacredness of all texts?

The simplicity of his chapter titles belies what is a tremendously broad-ranging discussion. In Chapter 1, "Production," he takes on early American printing practices and the ways in which American printers of the revolutionary era increasingly gave way to various Bible Societies which could better afford the risks of assembling, publishing, and distributing such an immensely complex book. Since the profits of bible printing could be measured in both financial and spiritual terms, the issues at stake in compiling such texts were often quite different than those motivating other printers. While the initial impetus to publish an American bible



was in part due to the sudden breakdown of international trade thanks to the American Revolution, it was also fueled by the usual combinations of lucre and love. Gutjahr attends to the particulars of how men like Matthew Carey and Robert Aitken compiled and marketed early American bibles. One of Carey's agents, Parson Weems, for example, traveled around America drumming up sales and book orders. His extant correspondence demonstrates that the issues facing bible sales were not always that different from concerns more pedestrian texts might face. The packaging of bibles, for example, caused no end of headaches for Weems. Carelessly nailed crates could impale precious texts. Gutjahr quotes Weems: "Beg Sylvester to have mercy on the word of God, and not to crucify it afresh thro his miserable Carpentership. I give this hint because one of the Bibles is so crippled by a spike nail that I must doctor it marvelously indeed if ever to bring it to survive a fair daylight inspection" (28). By situating the development of the distinctly American bible in the history of international trade, enlightenment values, American industrial development and even in the banalities of American shipping practices, we can see how the bible market was reshaped.

While the emergence of the American Bible Society in the early nineteenth century achieved great success in flooding American homes with the same versions of the Bible, the mass distribution and marketing the Society pioneered was quickly adopted by competing publishers or Bible Societies and thus the nineteenth century was to swiftly see an increasingly diversified, not solidified, market.

Gutjahr's goal is not, however, to debunk any sort of sacred history by inordinately focussing upon mechanics and distribution. In "Packaging," he analyses the physicality of the Bible by looking initially

at George Washington whose inaugural oath of Presidency was taken with his hand on a lavishly decorated, cushioned Bible which he then opened and kissed. Washington supposedly kissed a randomly chosen passage which was Genesis, chapter 49 and 50—chapters telling of how the Israelites had been promised a new Land. Since the Constitution has never required any such biblical presence for presidential oaths, the centrality of the physical Bible in such public ceremony merits the interrogation that Gutjahr gives it. Washington neither read nor was read to from the Bible, yet its mere physical presence and uncannily prescient role in aligning the United States with the land of Israel, suggest that the most communicative aspect of the book was often its physicality.

It is perhaps appropriate therefore, that Gutjahr livens up an otherwise dry discussion of the technology shaping illustrations and binding during this period with a consideration of nudity within biblical illustration as a case study for how juxtaposed visual and verbal texts could serve a myriad of purposes. While titillating illustrations could reach and please a variety of audiences, the often textually unjustified inclusion of bare-breasted women, for example, demonstrated what Gutjahr called a "financial canniness and moral elasticity" (56) not often attributed to producers of the Bible.

Illustrations helped make the Bible a travel guide; maps of the Holy Land became increasingly popular as ways to both traverse an imaginative terrain and to plan actual trips to the land of Canaan. While the growth of American tourism was clearly involved in the increasing popularity of maps within Bibles, the increasing emphasis upon topological and scientific accuracy reflects also a nascent interest in codifiable or verifiable history. As other cultural forces increasingly challenged the scriptural authority or cultural domi-

nance of the Bible, it bolstered its authority by invoking terms of scientific discourse. The stories depicted had obviously occurred because there was nothing sacred or profane that could contradict God's truth.

The increasingly lavish packaging of books encouraged display, and, indeed, one of the primary differences between the Bible in the 17th and 18th century and the Bible of the 19th century was its domestically decorative role. The sacralization of domestic space, as Gutjahr puts it, was a hallmark of American sentimentalism, and the popularity of illuminated Bibles helped foster "an interpretation of the family dwelling space as holy... The Bible was seen as a representation of the indwelling presence of the word of God in the home..." (71). By adding family trees, pictures, photographs, and other miscellaneous materials, bibles could both chronicle a family's relationship with God and its relationship with the community of Christ. Catered to by ever-imaginative manufacturers, the nineteenth century saw bibles develop as intellectual cornucopias, virtual encyclopedias that demonstrated how the word of God encompassed all.

In "Purity," Gutjahr examines the history of various translations to see how the quest to recover competing meanings of the original text was variously undertaken. He reminds us of the famous proof-reading errors that resulted in the "Wicked Bible" which commanded "Thou Shalt Commit Adultery," and the "Murderers' Bible" that accidentally featured a passage in the Gospel of Mark saying, "Let the children first be killed" rather than "filled." The issues at stake in translations were, of course, far more complex than mere typographical errors would suggest and this chapter follows the attempts of the Unitarians and others to wage theological arguments via sectarian translations.

The Baptists, for example, were

deeply concerned with a word that could be translated from Greek as "immersion" and hence implied that the more common translations of this word which did not invoke full baptismal immersion were in effect damning misled readers to hell. The Baptists' concerns were, of course, far more broad-ranging than just with this one particular word. The American Bible Union, founded by Baptists in 1850, worked to correct what they saw as twenty-four thousand errors found in the King James version. Yet what variable translations of this word implied about human fallibility, the purity of original texts and the possibility for the different scholarly models over interpretation were staggeringly important. Unlike previous arguments over the doctrine of Trinity and the question of whether that word had ever actually appeared in an original biblical text (a concern raised by Unitarians), this particular battle over immersion addressed not the presence of a particular word but the implications for scholarly authority to interpret what the words meant. Whether baptism meant a mere sprinkling of water or demanded total immersion, as the Baptists held, was not an arcane philological point but truly demanded that the meaning of a particular sign system be understood in a manner that would save or damn men's souls.

While competing sectarian differences dominated discussions over the Protestant bible in the early nineteenth century, by the mid and late nineteenth century the immigration of millions of Catholics to the United States radically altered the ways in which the relationship between religion and the state could be imagined. Since the public school system had, up to this point, commonly taught from the Bible and generally kept the Bible present in the classroom, the challenges posed by Catholic families who lobbied for alternative bibles

or alternative classroom practices, shook the Protestant dominance of both biblical production and American culture itself. In his chapter entitled "Pedagogy," Gutjahr argues that American Catholics helped "lay the foundation for displacing the Bible as America's most commonly read text by challenging the role of religious sectarianism in the country's public schools" (118). Indeed, Gutjahr posits that while Catholic reformers rarely challenged the presence of a bible in the classroom, their campaign to change the Protestant bias of the school system led to the avenue by which religion was removed from school curriculums. The physical presence of the Bible in our nation's schools has henceforth been the most potent spur for the separation of Church and State in American cultural life.

In the chapter "Popularity," we read about many off-shoots of the bible during the nineteenth century, most curiously, perhaps, the explosive success of Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880) and other such biblically-based fictions. Here Gutjahr argues that these novels won acceptance among Protestants "as a viable means for people to become imaginative participants in the Bible's narrative" (147). The figure of Jesus became a common cameo role in turn-of-the-century novels, and, although the increasing popularity of these books gave many religious leaders reason for joy at the increasing personal involvement the lay reader might find with the life of Christ, these novels could just as easily replace rather than supplement bible reading. As *Ben Hur* became a staple of Sunday school and a common source of information about the Holy Land, the motivation to work through challenging scripture was somewhat undermined. As Gutjahr puts it, "fiction proved a capricious means of drawing American readers to the Sacred Scriptures" (147).

Taking a different angle, Gutjahr places

the history of *The Book of Mormon* within this discussion of renditions of Christ's life. Joseph Smith's 1830 account of episodes during the life of Christ was a resolutely 19th-century American book that invoked the sacred idioms of its day in order to convey the tale of families who fled Jerusalem and settled in America hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. The records of these families were uncovered by Smith, who claimed to have found them inscribed on gold plates. Written in vaguely Elizabethan English, *The Book of Mormon* invoked the language of the King James Bible and revealed "how many Americans saw Elizabethan English as the only appropriate language in which to enfold the holy words of Scripture." One of the most historically significant claims that Smith's text put forth was that, unlike the debates raging among other sects of the purity of various translations, *The Book of Mormon* offered a purely sacred and uncorrupted text, one which predated the actual writers of the Bible.

The special history of North America in Smith's revelations also radically altered the ways in which people could see the role of the Bible. For while we have seen the fascination with the Holy Land and its concomitant urge to master necessary historical arcana, the Mormon emphasis upon the links of North America to a Sacred Scriptural tradition suggested that the knowledge of American history and landscape was important as, or even more important than, familiarizing oneself with the geography of Palestine. By claiming links between Native Americans and the early tribes of Israel as well as the actual visitation of Jesus Christ to the New World after his death and resurrection in the Middle East, Smith and his followers reformulated the Puritan tradition of rhetorically aligning North America with the Holy Land. Instead, *The Book of Mormon* was

a revelation that literally and figuratively emerged from American soil.

While diversity in scriptural traditions had always been a part of Christian history since monastic scribes, the history of the Bible in the United States was part of the fastest industrialization of the world's most literate population. And yet the growth of the 19th-century American publishing industry meant that the explosive nature of Bible publishing still couldn't keep up with the even more incredible expansion of American print materials generally. With more and more competing attractions for the literate public, the Bible gradually drifted away from the center of American reading culture. Whether this created a more commonplace and less sacred text, or whether this highlighted the truly sacred possibilities of the glorious *mutability* of the word, is yet to be resolved.

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## ELECTRIC RHETORIC

Kathleen Welch. *Electric Rhetoric: Classical Rhetoric, Oralism, and a New Literacy*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1999. 222 pp. \$40.

**K**athleen Welch uses the sophist Isocrates (436-338 BCE), whose extraordinarily long life and career overlapped those of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to argue for a dialogic view of language and literacy to take the place of the monologic perspective in place in a hyperliterate culture. Welch endorses not just speech and writing (or orality and literacy, or oralism—her term—and literacy) as dialogic, critical, and performative processes, but in-

cludes the language of video, especially television, and of the computer. For Welch, “electric rhetoric”—the language use of electronic communication—is “not a destroyer of literacy, as is commonly thought,” but rather “an extension of literacy” (157). But it is more “a form of consciousness (*mentalité*)” and “a definitive part of the new literacy” (157). The “electric” literacy Welch espouses takes into account new methods of delivery and seeks to connect electronic discourse (a part of real life in our culture) to print discourse (part of school life only having little to do with real life for many).

Like other revisionist rhetoricians, Welch sees in the sophism of the fourth century BCE a number of positive qualities the mainstream academic rhetorical tradition has either failed to see (the generous view) or has actively repressed (the suspicious view). Revisionists depict the sophists not as the manipulative sleaze-balls seen in a number of Plato's dialogues, most noticeably the *Gorgias*, but rather as kindred spirits of today's postmodernist thinkers. For revisionists like Welch, the sophists, believing that any truth is created in and by language, are far more open-minded, more open to difference, more likely to realize that what is considered right is actually historical and cultural, more playful and more practical, more questioning, more willing to look at the other side of the argument than traditionalists, however identified, who believe that truth really exists out there somewhere and can be found with the right tools, e.g. dialectic, the scientific method, New Criticism, etc. Welch chooses Isocrates to stand against a repressive, monologic, linear literacy and rhetoric purporting to deliver a truth already found, a rhetoric that she sees described and prescribed in Aristotle.

Welch seeks to rehabilitate Isocrates for two reasons. One is that Isocrates wrote his speeches, but did not himself deliver them; they were distributed and read aloud