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The Bible in America, America in the Bible

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In 1975, the publishing arm of Jerry Falwell's burgeoning conservative evangelical empire – then called “Jerry Falwell Ministries Aflame” – published a bible to commemorate the nation's bicentennial. It's actually just a Thomas Nelson King James with about 150 pages of American-history factoids and conservative boilerplate bound-in at the front. Thomas Nelson was then and is now one of the biggest publishers of bibles in the world – they specialize in those big personalizable bibles with poofy white covers that church groups sell as fundraisers, or that hospice workers give away. This bible's poofy white cover has an image of the Liberty Bell embossed on it, in gold.

Forty-odd years later, Thomas Nelson published an heir to the *Bicentennial Bible* called *The American Patriot's Bible: The Word of God and the Shaping of America* (2009), edited by Richard G. Lee. This bible contains the same sort of extra-scriptural content

as the *Bicentennial*, but it is much more complex and ambitious. Rather than just inserting some ‘merica at the beginning of a generic bible, Lee (founding pastor of First Redeemer Church in Atlanta) has carefully integrated quotations, images, and ideological reflections from American history into the pages of scriptural text.

There are a few other “Americanized bibles,” as I’ll call them. There’s *The Founders’ Bible*, for which [pretend scholar](#) David Barton serves as something called “Signature Historian.” There’s a condensed soldier’s edition of the *Patriot’s Bible*, in camo, and one aimed more specifically at children. There’s even an Americanized edition of the 1599 Geneva Bible, offering “the same Scripture, word for word, that the Pilgrims brought to America nearly 400 years ago,” bound along with the American founding documents.¹ The editors of these texts explain that combining American history with a bible seems like an obvious sort of thing to do, because the Bible is right up there with apple pie in terms of its identification with America. “Without the Bible, and adherence to its teachings and principles, America would never have become a land of unparalleled freedom and opportunity,” one of the prefatory essays in the *Bicentennial* proclaims (105). At its highest reaches, this rhetoric so identifies America

¹ See [here](#).

and the Bible that one wonders if the Christian scriptures had much of a life before the late-eighteenth century. “It has been America’s hope, its foundation, its mold and character. It is America’s Book from Almighty God,” another essay in the *Bicentennial* declares (59).

The importance of the Bible to America is a matter for discussion; what is definitely true, though, is that these bibles participate in a long tradition of *saying* that the Bible is important to America. Lee’s annotations in the *Patriot’s Bible*, in particular, make this clear. What’s more interesting, I think, is that these books also participate in another longstanding tradition of American biblicism: emphasizing the singular efficacy of the Bible while heavily supplementing, summarizing, and explaining the Bible. The editors of the *Patriot’s* and the *Bicentennial* maintain that the Bible is all-sufficient – for salvation, for life, for governance – in paratextual material they have attached to it: that is, they supplement the Bible by way of saying that it needs no supplement. Overlaying the bible with explanatory material in order to make it transparent is a complex rhetorical strategy, to say the least, but both sets of editors are operating squarely within the parameters of the Bible’s history in America. The tension that

these two books bear out goes back to the Reformation, but it became a particularly salient factor in American biblicism at the turn of the nineteenth century.² There is a complicated relationship between proclaiming the authority of the Bible and presenting oneself as an authority *on* the Bible. In a few pretty informal reflections here, I want to put that tension in historical perspective and advance some thoughts about the effect that Americanized bibles might have on readers' understanding of both the Bible and biblical authority.

There are plenty of things for historians to object to in the *Bicentennial* and *Patriotic* bibles. They are products of a strain of conservative evangelical thought that has exhibited a willingness to distort the historical record in order to shore up a particular view of America as a "Christian nation." I'm going to leave that aside here, for the most part; for a frank and thoughtful exploration of these issues, I'd suggest

² For more on American biblicism in the nineteenth century, see Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States 1777-1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). I explore the authority questions surrounding bible usage in America at length in my dissertation, "The Endless Making of Many Books: Bibles and Religious Authority in America, 1780-1850," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2013).

John Fea's excellent, approachable *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Whatever their problems, the underlying assumption that drives these Americanized bibles – that the Christian Bible has been a significant presence in American history – is certainly not one of them. The Bible has been a ubiquitous presence in American public rhetoric, in the recorded private moments of its citizens, and everywhere in between. The *Bicentennial Bible* drives home this point with quotes of or about the Bible, mostly from the Founders and various Presidents. In the *Patriot's Bible*, Lee does a more thorough job of collecting biblical citations from Americans across a broad spectrum – John Eliot, Puritan “Apostle to the Indians”; radical African-American abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet; Helen Keller; Captain Russell Rippey, killed in Iraq in 2003. Bible-affirming quotations from these figures are cited in small boxes on pages of text; often, entire pages are inserted recounting some prominent use of the Bible by prominent Americans. The first of these features the Apollo 8 astronauts reading from Gen 1 as they orbited the moon in 1968, which, frankly, you don't have to be a creationist to find pretty cool. Many of Lee's connections between

figures and moments from American history and scripture do not involve direct biblical citations, but are rather connections that Lee himself has made, typically with reference to the predictable litany of conservative political issues. School prayer is a favorite: an entry on “the censoring of religious activities in public schools” is pegged to Prov 22:28 (“Do not remove the ancient landmark which your fathers have set”), for example.

Some of Lee’s connections aren’t terribly transparent: he places Gen 37:28 (Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery) alongside a quote about liberty from...Dick Cheney.

Very few of the prominent Americans quoted on the pages of the *Patriot’s* are women; an even smaller number, by my rough count, are Catholics. Christopher Columbus and Pope John Paul II get their moments, despite not being Americans; John F. Kennedy shows up on the list of presidents. Catholics’ role in the history of the Bible in America goes unremarked, though. A section on “The Bible and American Education,” for example, predictably laments the fact that bibles are no longer used as textbooks (resulting in “a loss of moral standards [opening] the door to untold numbers of unwanted teen pregnancies, abortions, drug abuse, alcoholism, violence, and suicide”), but the history of Catholic objections to compulsory reading of the Protestant

bible in schools is not mentioned (I-24). Rather, the complexity of Christian approaches to the Bible is simplified into a legacy agreeable to contemporary conservative Protestant evangelicals: one Catholic quoted in the *Patriot's* is the late Rep. Henry Hyde, vocal abortion opponent. Anecdotally, I can suggest that it's possible that this simplification works for readers: the used copy of the *Patriot's* I bought online came with a novena bookmark printed by the Legionaries of Christ, a conservative Catholic group.

What are we to make of all these American voices injected into the Bible? As annotated bibles, these books have plenty of company in American history. The Geneva Bible used by seventeenth-century Puritans had extensive marginal cues. Many of the first bibles printed in America, starting in the late eighteenth century, were massive annotated editions, beginning with John Brown's *Self-Interpreting Bible* in 1792; Thomas Scott's six-volume behemoth, first published in America between 1804 and 1809; and Philip Doddridge's *Family Expositor* (first American edition 1807-8). The authors of all of these commentaries wrote that they intended their work to promote better access to the native clarity of scripture, but each necessarily promoted certain

readings: John Brown's *Self-Interpreting Bible* was actually a bible interpreted by John Brown. Congregational minister Hervey Wilbur was one of the first Americans to publish a fully annotated bible, beginning in the 1820s. Rather than offering commentary in the margins, as was typical, Wilbur placed letters corresponding to questions listed in a "Key" at the front of his bible, which he insisted readers should memorize prior to reading. For example, when encountering a lowercase "s" next to a verse, the reader was to immediately think of Wilbur's suggested context for considering that verse: "What affecting SCENE is here exhibited? What feeling should it produce?" An uppercase "L," meanwhile, denoted "What LOFTY FLIGHTS of devotional fervour? What longings after intimate communion with God are here manifested?" The Key – along with the several other charts and tables that Wilbur included in his bible – was to become the lens through which readers would view the Bible. By structuring his audience's Bible reading in this way, Wilbur was only being more overt about the tacit goals of all bible commentators. There is always an authority claim involved in annotation. More immediately, with respect to the Americanized bibles, conservative evangelicals are working out of a tradition defined

by the *Schofield Reference Bible* (1909), a heavy-handed bonanza of annotations marshalled to demonstrate the obviousness of dispensationalist reading.

Like Wilbur's key and the *Schofield*, Americanized bibles are creating a lens to guide readers. The astronauts, politicians, and soldiers quoted in the *Patriot's* and the *Bicentennial* aren't really offering biblical commentary, though, in the sense of explaining or elaborating the meaning of particular passages. They are, rather, connecting the Bible to something beyond itself. Making such a connection by filling a bible's pages with resonant quotations also has a history in American publishing. In 1800, book-peddler Mason Weems suggested to publisher Mathew Carey (a Catholic, by the way, who made a lot of money selling Protestant bibles) that their planned bible would sell better if they gave up on the usual explanatory annotations and instead lined its margins with relevant wise words from philosophy and literature. "What if at the foot of each page, and in lieu of those poor dead & alive things called notes, you

were to put some of those fine striking sentiments which Locke, Milton, Penn, &c, &c, &c, &c, could and very willingly would furnish.”³

Carey didn't bite and published no such bible, but Weems's idea has its realization in numerous subsequent American bibles connecting the Bible to particular demographic characteristics, occupations, and political issues. Distinct from annotated bibles aimed at promoting general Bible understanding and appreciation, these are narrowly focused on making a particular connection. During the suffrage movement, *The Woman's Bible* (1895-98), edited by a committee chaired by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, pointedly highlighted the most important moments of women's presence and conspicuous absence in the Bible.⁴ Other Americans have published bibles connecting scripture to Freemasonry; being really busy; being a teenager; firefighting.⁵

Like Weems's proposed bible these books connect the Bible to something beyond itself: *this* (the Bible) is relevant to *that* (characteristic, disposition, ideology). In

Weems's case, the connection was to contemporary philosophy and culture; the goal (as

³ Mason Locke Weems to Mathew Carey, 8-18-1800, in *Mason Locke Weems: his works and ways. In three volumes*. Paul Leicester Ford and Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel, eds. (Norwood, Mass.: Plimpton Press, 1929).

⁴ See Margaret T. Hills, *The English Bible in America: A Bibliography of the Bible and the New Testament Published in America 1777-1957* (New York: American Bible Society, 1961), 2067.

⁵ See Hills 2327 and 2224; the *Teen Study Bible* (Zonderkidz, 2008); the *Firefighter's Bible* (Holman Bible Publishers, 2004).

with most other narrowly-focused bibles) was partly to sell more books, but as an Episcopal clergyman he also professed a desire to assert the Bible's continued relevance alongside other early-national influences.⁶ In the case of the Americanized bibles, of course, the connection being made is to America. As with any annotated bible, there's nothing given about the connection being made – those responsible for the Americanized bibles are actually working to prove what they claim to be merely displaying. The extra-biblical material marshalled to connect the Bible to America (as to firefighting) constitutes an argument. The argumentative nature of the *Bicentennial* and the *Patriot's* is plainest in the essays they contain. Unlike the compiled endorsements of past Americans, these are written directly to the reader in the voice of a commentator. Several different essayists are responsible for the content of the *Bicentennial Bible*, but the message is consistently conservative (several of the authors were faculty members at Falwell's Liberty Baptist College, now Liberty University). Most emphatically, both books offer handy summaries of what the Bible is actually about. In the case of the *Bicentennial Bible*, this takes the form of creedal statement from the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. Lee, on the other hand, has distilled the

⁶ As evinced by the quote above, he also thought contemporary bible annotations were desperately boring, which happens to be true.

Bible into “The Seven Principles of the Judeo-Christian Ethic,” which, not coincidentally, he also finds to be the basis for everything American. These are: “the dignity of human life”; “the traditional monogamous family”; “a national work ethic”; “the right to a God-centered education”; “the Abrahamic covenant”; “common decency”; “our personal accountability to God.”

Inserting such strong – and in this case heavily politicized – arguments about the Bible between the covers of a bible forcefully raises the question that all commentaries raise to some degree or another – the question of authority. Clearly, on one hand this involves the authority of the commentator: who gets to say what the Bible means? Who has the authority to lead a reader through the text? Who establishes relevance? Conventional commentaries published in America have tended to rely on academic credentials for authority, and that’s in play with these books: Lee’s author bio mentions no fewer than four postgraduate degrees, plus additional work toward a fifth. The authority claimed by the compilers of these bibles, though, is perhaps best summarized by Lee in his acknowledgements. After listing those to whom he would like to offer particular thanks for helping put the *Patriot’s Bible* together, Lee writes: “Each and

every one is a true American Patriot.” Editorial authority for an Americanized bible comes more from one’s status as a particular sort of American than anything having directly to do with the Bible.

This brings us to what I think is the most interesting aspect of these books. In addition to the authority question pertaining to an editor’s credibility, all annotations and commentaries open up questions about the authority of the Bible itself. This is much more readily apparent in these books than in past American bibles. To offer a commentary – to elaborate on a text – is to assert that the text is worthy of comment, that it has relevance to something beyond itself. The authority of a text exists only in symbiosis with the authority of its users, and this is as true for bibles as for any other text. Textual authority is never inert or separate from its contexts. The material presentation and authoritative use of bibles is part of a matrix of factors that also includes the Bible’s capacity to be used as an authority.⁷ That capacity, for all of the rhetoric, is not inviolate – it depends on the practices of Bible users.

⁷ Here, I’m drawing on the work of theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.

Rarely have biblical commentators appeared so conscious of this fact. Typically, American bible commentators have sought to justify particular editions of the Bible – a given translation or commentary – not labored to shore up the authority of the Bible itself. From start to finish, these Americanized bibles are doing exactly that, while pegging the importance of the Bible to its relevance to America. Its value is established by appeal to the opinions of prominent Americans, typically as expressed in popular political rhetoric, a move that actually places authority to validate the Bible in American public life, subjecting it to politically-inflected speech. What distinguishes the concept of an Americanized bible is that it must argue for an understanding of the Bible that is dependent on something external to the “Judeo-Christian” tradition that the producers of Americanized bibles go on about. The editors of these bibles are not arguing for a particular meaning of the Bible, but for the Bible’s particular meaning for something that, strictly speaking, has nothing to do with the Bible itself – that is, America. Both the *Bicentennial Bible* and the *Patriot’s Bible* use metaphors of architecture or, I suppose, pottery to talk about what they mean by importance, about what the Bible has done for America: “the Bible has shaped America”; “has been America’s hope, its foundation, its mold and character”; it has played a part “in

molding and developing this country”; “it has proven itself over and over again in the formation and continuance of the greatest nation in history, the United States of America.” (The *Founders’ Bible*, incidentally, also uses this “shaping” metaphor.)

The Americanized bibles argue that we know that the Bible has shaped America because of all of those references – those involved in the shaping have been making reference to the Bible for 500-odd years. A favorite moment in this history, naturally, is the Revolution, and predictably both the *Bicentennial* and the *Patriot’s* recount the story of the first full English bible printed in America, retold in variously inaccurate ways in a number of conservative evangelical sources. Long story short, the Continental Congress did not “sponsor” or “authorize” that bible, but the Americanized bibles tell the story as if the Revolutionary government made printing bibles an important part of fighting the war.⁸ Why is it so important to the promoters of

⁸ The historical record shows that in July of 1777, a group of Presbyterian ministers who were concerned about what they saw as a shortage of bibles in the new nation petitioned Congress to endow domestic bible printing. The petition called for Congress to import type and paper, choose a printer to carry out the work, and oversee the bible’s reliability. Bids were solicited from Philadelphia printers, but eventually the congressional committee charged with looking into the project decided that the whole thing wasn’t worth it, what with the war and all. They suggested instead that Congress move to import 20,000 bibles from “Holland, Scotland or elsewhere.” In this, the delegates to the Continental Congress showed none of the petitioners’ concern that the government have complete control of the text, as they effectively approved the importation of English-language bibles from wherever they could be had. In any case, the plan was never executed. In 1782 Robert Aitken, who had submitted a bid to Congress for the bible project and had already produced a New Testament, took it on himself to print a complete bible, the first English Bible printed in America. Influenced by the earlier petition, Aitken pursued the project with the desire to

Americanized bibles to insist that the Founders thought it essential that the government take responsibility for printing bibles; that nearly every word out of their mouths was a quotation from the Bible; that the Bible *shaped* them? The answer is clear from the first page of the *Patriot's Bible*. While there was plenty of hand-wringing about the loss of America's biblical heritage in the *Bicentennial Bible*, the forty years that separate it from the *Patriot's* have left the latter with a frankly embattled tone. Lee prefaces his text not with an account of how the Bible came to be, as is found in the *Bicentennial*, but with a "call to action" exhorting readers to "protect that which is right and change that which is wrong in our great nation." Paratexts – the framing materials of a text – act as

sell Congress on the idea of approving and underwriting his bible. He received none of the financial support he requested, but he did get an enthusiastic if somewhat careful response from the congressional chaplains. "Having selected and examined a variety of passages throughout the work, we are of opinion that it is executed with great accuracy as to the sense, and with as few grammatical and typographical errors as could be expected in an undertaking of such magnitude." By contemporary British standards, Aitken's bible was not much to look at it – it had cramped margins (owing to the expensiveness of paper). By 1782, the war was over and the import market was back on its feet; cheaper and better-made bibles from England left little room for Aitken's in the market.

The sorts of American Christians interested in Americanized bibles have valorized Aitken's bible as the "Bible of the Revolution" and variously garbled this story. The *Bicentennial Bible* contains an essay by a professor at Liberty asserting that the 20,000 bibles were imported from Holland and that Congress "authorized" Aitken's bible (134). In the *Patriot's*, Lee corrects the *Bicentennial* on these points, but adds a telling new error in claiming that Aitken petitioned Congress for permission to print the bible (684). This implies that the Continental Congress had claimed the right to control Bible publishing, as the British crown had done, lending an official air to the Bible's relationship to America; however, it didn't happen that way. An entrepreneur in a free market, Aitken bid on a government contract that was never given out and then he asked the government to blurb the bible he went ahead and printed anyway. See William H. Gaines, Jr., "The Continental Congress Considers the Publication Of A Bible, 1777," *Studies in Bibliography*, Volume 3 (1950-1951), 276; Margaret T. Hills, *The English Bible in America: A Bibliography of the Bible and the New Testament Published in America 1777-1957* (New York: American Bible Society, 1961), 2; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 10-01-1782. For more on the conservative evangelical mangling of this story, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rodde/no-mr-beck-congress-did-n_b_598698.html.

thresholds, entrances: they are the means by which readers enter a text.⁹ A “call to arms” essay at the front of a bible demanding readers to recognize that “our nation is rapidly drifting from its biblical foundations” places a particular understanding of American history between readers and the Bible, which is an interesting thing for conservative evangelicals to do, ostensibly being so committed to the Bible’s self-sufficiency.

In any case, references to the Bible by prominent Americans and the Revolutionary government’s interest in its promulgation aren’t really proof of ideological influence. What the long list of quotes in the *Patriot’s Bible* demonstrates is not that the Bible has long been important to Americans, but that Americans have always said that it was, which – as the editors of these books would surely tell you themselves – is not the same thing. Mark Noll has discussed the ubiquity of the Bible in early America at length, wondering about its actual influence, even on those ostensibly most committed to its veracity. “Did ministers, preaching from the Bible as public spokesmen, really use Scripture as a primary source for the convictions they expressed? Or did they in fact merely exploit Scripture to sanctify convictions –

⁹ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

whether nationalistic, political, social, or racial – which had little to do with biblical themes?”¹⁰ Noll comes down largely for the latter, viewing the Bible’s relationship to America as something more like a book of authoritative phrases than a law book. In any case, I imagine many of the “Judeo-Christian” persuasion would be saddened to think that the Bible “molded,” “formed,” or otherwise “shaped” the darker aspects of American history. It is certainly true that various slaveholders, Indian agents, and, I don’t know, serial killers – *people*, that is – have used scripture to support their causes, just as have abolitionists and civil rights advocates. Books don’t “shape” anything without readers.

Both of these Americanized bibles want to go beyond Americans’ citation of biblical phrases and direct praise for the Bible to suggest that biblical principles are woven into the nation’s DNA. In a prefatory note to its included set of Presidential portraits, the *Bicentennial Bible* notes that scripture has influenced all of them, hard as it might be to see sometimes. “Although, in many cases, the influence may seem to be indirect, the Bible, by being the major factor in shaping the spiritual understanding of

¹⁰ “The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776-1865,” in Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 41.

most of the men who have held the highest office in the land, has exerted a strong force in the formation of America.” Lee warns his readers, wisely, against being dragged into debates over the religious convictions of this or that Founder. What’s important, he says, is that “the Founders almost all *thought* from a biblical perspective, whether they believed or not” (I-9). This takes on a sort of “anonymous Christian” feel – the Founders were working with Judeo-Christian principles, even when they thought they were drawing on notions of natural law, Scottish Common Sense, or whatever. This has to be true, Lee flatly asserts, because “human liberty or dignity [are] uniquely Judeo-Christian ideals” (I-11).

The *Bicentennial* and the *Patriot’s* face in very distinct ways the possibility that Americans have not always lived up to those ideals – or that various of them have sought to “shape” different Americas around different understandings of the Bible. The signature topic here, of course, is American slavery, which was plainly violating at least six of Lee’s supposed America-shaping Judeo-Christian principles during the period in which America was shaped. (These were, remember: “the dignity of human life”; “the traditional monogamous family”; “a national work ethic”; “the right to a God-centered

education”; “common decency”; and “our personal accountability to God.” I’m not really sure how his seventh one, “the Abrahamic covenant,” would apply in this context.) Both the *Bicentennial* and the *Patriot’s* cite Abraham Lincoln’s famous framing of the paradox in his second inaugural: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other,” referring to the North and the South. Only Lee, however, finishes the quote, allowing Lincoln’s biting recognition of the irony involved to come through: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.” In the *Bicentennial Bible* the late George W. Dollar – author of *A History of Fundamentalism in America* and a professor at Bob Jones University – attempts to sound a triumphant note for the Bible even on this greatest of ironies: because of the Civil War, “the Bible grew in popular knowledge and use; both sides turned to it to find texts for their arguments within its pages. In the titantic [sic] struggle honored associations broke apart and churches split. Powerful orators on both sides clinched their positions with appropriate Biblical passages and examples. But the Word of God was still the final source of authority” (59).

The oddness of that moment – the assertion that the Bible remained authoritative to Americans in the Civil War, even as they used it in diametrically opposed ways, with horrific consequences – characterizes the Americanized bibles. In the *Patriot's*, Lee is more forthright about condemning some Americans' use of the Bible, but ultimately his account begs the same questions. “[W]hen a monumental fight for freedom and justice was at hand,” he writes, “faith in God was there to strengthen the activists. We also see, unfortunately, that too often the staunchest opposition to any of these movements came from sectors of the religious establishment of the day” (I-41). Lee’s treatment is honest – both of those statements are true – but, then: how to celebrate the role of the Bible in American history while observing that many American Bible-readers have been, by Lee’s own standards, wrong? In this ideological system, does it hurt one’s view of America or of the Bible to know that Americans have used scripture both to justify and condemn the same things? This has significant relevance to the stated goal of an Americanized bible, because it’s hard to argue simultaneously for a “return” to biblical principles and to be frank about how

those principles played out in the past. The main lesson of the *Bicentennial* and the *Patriot's* may be that evangelicals' goal of Americanizing the Bible is at cross-purposes with their goal of biblicizing America, because they make the Bible dependent on a particular reading of American history. Those interested in Americanized bibles risk undermining their divine text with a history that, for all their efforts, remains human.