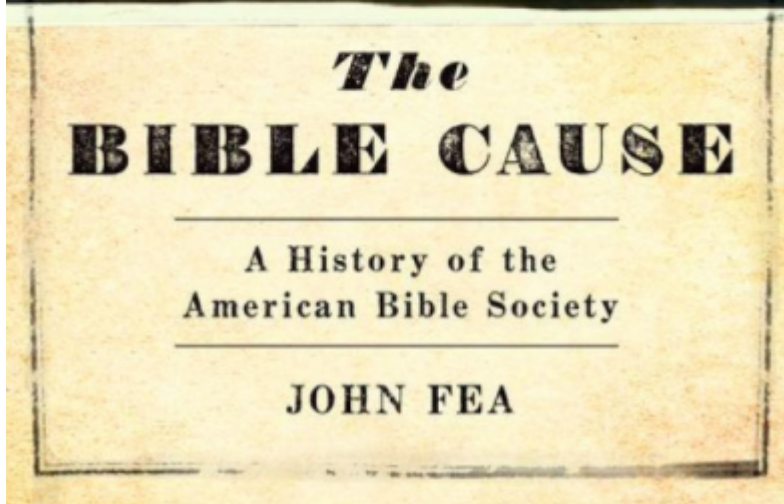


Bibles, American Style





John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 384 pp., \$29.95.

John Fea's *The Bible Cause* is an ambitious bicentennial history of the American Bible Society, the evangelical benevolent organization founded in New York in 1816. The American Bible Society was massive. Fueled by a can-do millennial spirit, its leaders sought to place a Bible with every family in the country, and eventually, the world. New technologies allowed the society to produce Bibles at a scale never before seen: after installing steam-powered presses in the late 1820s, the publisher produced 600,000 Bibles a year (31). A vast network of auxiliaries worked to circulate the sacred texts across the expanding geography of the United States. The society continued to produce and distribute Bibles in such astronomical numbers that by the late twentieth century, leaders resorted to measuring their impact in "tonnage" (301).

The argument of *The Bible Cause* is that the American Bible Society was an eminently American institution that sought to build a Christian nation. Throughout its history the society worked to forge a country unified "around Protestantism and the social virtues that logically flowed from its teachings" (23). Like other voluntary associations of the antebellum era, the American Bible Society aspired to nonsectarianism and to universal appeal. The society's leaders, though mostly belonging to Calvinist denominations, regarded themselves as doing the work of reinforcing a "Protestant consensus" that served both God and country (28).

Fea moves steadily through two centuries of the society's religious activities and their relation to political events and cultural movements in American history. These include the society's devotion to federalism at its founding; the spreading of Bibles abroad on the coattails of imperialism in the western Mediterranean and China; Reconstruction-era domestic missions to African Americans; patriotism and troop outreach during the World Wars; and the society's alliance with the Protestant mainline and later embrace of the Christian right. Fea ends with an image of the society's delivery of scripture

booklets to Ground Zero in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. He vividly draws these and other sections by focusing on the individuals involved. For instance, he introduces us to S. Brooks McLane, affectionately known as “the Bible guy” to troops in Texas during the First World War, his Ford Roadster packed with Bibles. We learn of John Percy Wragg, the African American Methodist pastor who ran the society’s “Colored Agency” from 1901 and hired the society’s first black colporteurs.

The extent of the American Bible Society’s claims on national identity may be seen in one episode in 1818. That year the society administrator Samuel Bayard petitioned Congress for an exemption from domestic postage and import taxes on paper, on the basis that the society’s work was salutary for “national character” (24). If vaccinations were tax-exempt, then surely Bibles ought to be as well. Such an exemption would not violate the First Amendment, Bayard noted, which forbade a specific religious establishment—it was never meant to apply to the universal, nonsectarian doctrines of the Bible. After all, biblical principles were American principles. A greater availability of Bibles in fact promoted the exercise of religious liberty. Though Bayard’s petition did not succeed, the episode speaks to the society’s confidence in speaking as a religious, cultural, and political authority for the American people.

One minor quibble is that there are few physical bibles in *The Bible Cause*. Fea describes how Bibles were supposed to be simple and represent the pure word of God (who spoke most purely in the King James Version). We are told frequently that the society’s Bibles were published “without note or comment” (13). By design the society did not include “images, illustrations, or other curiosities” (32) and ignored the luxury market. But what did these millions of Bibles—whose production and distribution, Fea writes, was the “sole object” of the American Bible Society (22)—look and feel like? How were Bibles made and used? Fea is not a book historian or bibliographer, and certainly the methods of those fields are not the only gainful ways to examine the publisher’s archives. But where Fea does consider publishing activities and the Bibles themselves in greater detail, questions remain. In a discussion of its early production, Fea notes that the society sold three kinds of Bibles, which varied in price from 60 cents to \$3, depending on the quality of paper (31). However, a \$3 book was not cheap circa 1820, likely equivalent to about a week’s wages of one of the society’s female folders and stitchers who worked long hours in the bindery. What were the differences between these editions, and for whom were they designed?

This expansion of Bible formats continued throughout the antebellum period. Flipping open the society’s *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report* (1852) to its publication list, one finds that fifty-two editions of the Bible were available in the English language alone, ranging from 25 cents to \$10. The most expensive of these was a large quarto, bound in gilded morocco. Even the policy of “without note or comment” seems to have been fluid when it came to these more elegant Bibles; it is noted that many Bibles contain “references.” The American Antiquarian Society preserves many of these finer sorts of American Bible

Society Bibles in their collections. One example boasts silk headbands and registers, side references, and an embossed cover signed by Alexander C. Morin, the binder specializing in elegant gift books and albums. The absence of pictorial engravings in these Bibles does not indicate that the society was unconcerned with aesthetics, middle-class tastes, or the luxury market. Even though in its rhetoric the society professed to produce plain versions of the sacred word, in practice, by midcentury it was producing over fifty different media formats of the same text. Those formats were deliberately designed for different classes of consumers. With some humble editions, the society undersold the market. With its fine editions, the society entered the market boldly.

More Bibles appear in the later sections of the book devoted to the twentieth century, and many of these examples are fascinating. The society supplied khaki-covered Bibles picturing an American flag to troops in World War I. A 1960s-era new Bible translation called *Good News for Modern Man* featured line drawings and a cover designed to evoke newsprint. According to Fea, this cheap paperback was designed to be “used, marked, and scuffed up.” We hear the most from actual readers in this section: as Rick, a member of a “Jesus folk-rock” group in the late sixties put it, “*Good News for Modern Man* was never meant to look good on a bookshelf. It was at its best in disorderly stacks with its paperback cover bent and wrinkled” (259). The American Bible Society was attuned to the importance of the materiality of their Bibles in the twenty-first century as much as in the nineteenth. Leaders are now in the midst of developing a “wear-able Bible” for a watchband (314). The device will not only provide the Bible digitally on a small screen, but also will detect biometrics such as anxiety levels and offer the appropriate scriptural remedy. *The Bible Cause* is at its best in its telling of captivating granular details such as these.

Fea wrote *The Bible Cause* at the invitation of the American Bible Society. Other reviewers have suspected that their warm relationship explains the adulatory tone that crops up in the book. I wonder if an examination of the material record might have forced a more critical posture toward some of the textual sources as well. A material examination of the American Bible Society’s nineteenth-century Bibles would have shown that for all its professed emphasis on Bibles “without note or comment” and its promotional self-image as a Bible depository for the common people, the society was also intimately concerned with appealing to the tastes of the wealthy and the emerging middle class. Consumerism and class are part of the American story as well.

In the opening pages of *The Bible Cause*, Fea announces that he takes to heart the words of the retired general secretary of the American Bible Society: “The Bible Cause is about *people*” (1). Fea beautifully brings to life the people of this organization. It may be selfish to ask for more from a book replete with richly drawn portraits of individuals and careful accounting of their efforts. But surely for one of the country’s leading publishers—whose goal was to produce and distribute printed objects—the American Bible Society was about

things as well as people.

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