



# The Gospels

*the text of the*  
World English Bible



*edited by*  
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MMXI

## Preface

No, I didn't rewrite the Bible. This is the same old four Gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John—laid out in a way that hopefully makes them easier to read. Bibles have gotten so cluttered up with chapter and verse numbers, footnotes, cross-references, charts, maps, drawings, columns, sections, and sidebars, that it's hard to actually read the text straight through like a normal book. Besides that, the Bible is a big book. It's all important, but the Gospels are the *most* important. It should be easy for people to read the most important part of the Bible.

The *New English Bible* (NEB; Oxford/Cambridge, 1970) was my main inspiration. I found it in a used-book shop in college, and fell in love with it because it's so easy to read. All of the text is in one column, and the chapter and verse numbers are in the margin instead of inline in the text. There are section headings every so often, but other than that there are very few distractions. My friends and I would read it out loud to each other. If you pass the book around the room and each take a turn reading, it takes an hour or two to get through one of the Gospels. Unfortunately, the NEB isn't in print anymore. Also, it was published as a full Bible or the New Testament, but not just the Gospels.

Years later I led a Bible study group, and while in college we *read* whole books at a time, in our Bible study we *discussed* whole books at a time. We might read as much as a page or two at once, but it

was up to each person to read that week's book of the Bible on their own before the meeting.

For our Bible study we used an edition called *The Books of The Bible* (TBOTB, International Bible Society [IBS], 2007), which takes *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) and does a few interesting things with it. It sets it in one column, like the NEB. Unlike the NEB, it puts abbreviated chapter and verse numbers in the footer rather than in the margin, and uses unnumbered endnotes where the NEB uses footnotes. It's nice not to have footnotes, but it turns out that not having the full chapter and verse numbers is a step too far, because then it's hard to get everyone to the same spot on the page, especially if some people are using different translations.

The most interesting thing about TBOTB is how it reorders the books of the Bible. The traditional order for the New Testament is:

- |    |            |  |
|----|------------|--|
| 4  | GOSPELS    | Matthew, Mark, Luke, John                            |
|    | ACTS       | This is really Luke, Volume 2. Why is it after John? |
| 21 | LETTERS    | These are more or less jumbled together.             |
|    | REVELATION | This one does make sense at the end.                 |

In TBOTB, the New Testament is organized as four “streams,” each starting with a Gospel and then moving chronologically through the books within the same sub-tradition. For example, Mark is followed by 1 and 2 Peter and Jude, because there's a popular theory that the apostle Peter is the source behind Mark, and Jude is similar to Peter's two letters. The different book order is the best part of TBOTB. I'm presenting the four Gospels together because I think they are the most important part of the Bible, but I can imagine also putting out separate volumes for each of the TBOTB's Gospel streams.

Sadly, TBOTB is ugly. It's set in a clumsy font, the margins are too small, and the paper is cheap. The Bible's size does present a challenge for a book designer, especially with a group like the IBS that is focused on mass distribution and is trying to keep it affordable. Issuing multiple volumes would drive up the cost, and might also under-emphasize the thematic unity of the Bible.

I haven't used them in a group setting, but I did take ideas from two other editions of Scripture:

- Richmond Lattimore's *The New Testament* (North Point, 1997)
- *The Four Gospels* (Penguin, 2008)

The former is a good-quality paperback and is quite readable. It has chapter/verse ranges in the header, and no section headings at all. The Penguin edition is chock full of section headings. There are two or three of them on every page, and they're in bold, with cross-references in italics underneath. The chapter numbers are too large, the verse numbers are inline, and the bottom of the page is cluttered with unhelpful footnotes. The only good thing about this edition is that it is just the four Gospels, the only one like this I've found so far. Lattimore's out-of-print first edition of Scripture (1962) included the Gospels and Revelation.

Those are the four editions of the Bible that I've been most inspired by. Now for some notes on specific decisions I made when putting together this edition.



BOOK ORDERING—With Richmond Lattimore, I changed the ordering of the Gospels:

OLD	NEW
Matthew	Mark
Mark	Matthew
Luke	Luke
John	John

The reason to put Mark first is that the action moves faster, so it gives a better first impression of the Gospels overall. Matthew begins with a genealogy. Read that same distance into Mark, and Jesus is already calling his first two disciples. There is some historical justice to this switch as well, in that Mark is often thought to have been written first.

CHAPTER & VERSE—Our chapters were devised in the early 1200's and our verses in 1551. They barely relate to the meaning of the text, but they are wonderful for cross-referencing thousands of years of scholarship. They also make it easier for a group of people reading the Bible together to find where they are. For readability I followed the NEB's lead and put the chapter and verse numbers in the margin.

PAGE SCROLLING—I came up with this idea to be able to scroll through a book as if it were a web page, and now I see that the latest phone book from Verizon has done the same thing! It must be a good idea. Here, a black tab is printed on the right edge of the right page, representing the current Gospel. View the book edge on, and the tabs show the extent of each Gospel within the book as a whole. The height and edge-on width of the tab is proportional to the size of that Gospel. Open the book, and the numbers next to the tab are the chapters present on the two currently-open pages. They are positioned according to the distance of the chapter through the current Gospel.

Page scrolling is designed so that as one leafs through the pages like a flipbook, the book tabs and chapter numbers scroll down the side of the page. This helps to quickly locate book and chapter references. The verse numbers on the inside margin then help locate verse references. The numbers in the footer on the outside are regular page numbers.

Page scrolling began life as a sparkline at the bottom of the page, so I have Edward Tufte to thank for its inspiration. It's also related to how we marked the edges of our Greek and Hebrew dictionaries in college.

PUNCTUATION—In the spirit of Cormac McCarthy (e.g., *The Road*, Knopf, 2006), I removed single and double quotation marks, and I replaced semicolons with commas. Maybe this is a fad, but it's also a return: not only did the ancient texts have no punctuation whatsoever, but the immediate ancestor of the text adapted here also did not use quotation marks (the WEB adds them to the ASV; see TRANSLATION).

SCOPE—As with *The Four Gospels*, this edition only includes the four Gospels. I don't want people to miss out on the Gospels just because the whole Bible or even the whole New Testament is overwhelming.

I encourage any reader to also read anything and everything else—New Testament, Bible, Gnostic texts, other apocrypha, other scriptures, modern books, etc. I see the Gospels as a centerpoint, and not a boundary line.

SECTIONS—I added sections to the Gospels, to give a sense of the flow of the story for each Gospel, and to make it easy to divide up a Gospel over multiple sessions of a reading group. I call these *sections* and use letters to denote them because the word *chapter* with numerals is already taken. Sections are indicated at the bottom inside of the right page.

These are different from the sections in other editions because they are large in scope, they are untitled, and they actually start a new page. These sections are designed to feel like chapter breaks in a novel, giving you a place to stop if you really must get to bed, but at the same time drawing you onwards—"Just one more chapter!" There are 34 of them all told, and their size varies considerably according to the flow of the story for each Gospel.

TRANSLATION—I used the *World English Bible* because it's the best translation that I could use for free. It's a literal translation, a light modernization of the *American Standard Version*, and therefore a descendent of the *King James Version* and a sibling of the *New American Standard Version*. Michael Paul Johnson is the editor, and it is available in multiple formats at [ebible.org](http://ebible.org).

I would probably rather use a less literal translation, but which translation to use is not the most important thing. Someone who likes to study the Bible will own several translations. Someone who is less interested won't appreciate the subtle differences between them anyway. One way to offset the potential difficulty of this translation is to read the Gospels together as a group, because in a group setting better readers can help others. If everyone participates in shared reading, it builds confidence as well as community.

TYPOGRAPHY—This is my first time typesetting a book, so I thought it best to try to immitate a classic: the NEB. I referred often to Robert Bringhurst’s *The Elements of Typographical Style* (v3.2, Hartley & Marks, 2008) to understand the NEB’s technique.



The Gospels introduced something into human affairs that it is important to come to terms with, and the best way to do that is to actually read them. I hope that this edition helps you to read the Gospels, both on your own and with others.

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—Chad Whitacre  
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