



The Gospels

The Gospels

based on the
World English Bible
ebible.org



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MMXI

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The text of the *World English Bible* is in the public domain.

The preface is likewise placed in the public domain.

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Preface

This is an edition of the Gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John—optimized for reading at length in a group setting. I have been given to understand that this is how Christian Scripture was first propagated, and I prefer it to the currently prevailing practice of reading it as an unstructured collection of verses. This preference is partially the result of a systematic personality. I enjoy seeing the forest *and* the trees. However, it also derives from a love of the serendipitous, as I hope to make clear.

It all started in college, when I discovered the *New English Bible* (NEB; Oxford/Cambridge, 1970) in a used bookshop. As if it were the *Norton Anthology of Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, the NEB is beautifully typeset with one column per page, and chapter and verse numbers in the outside margin. Here was a Bible that almost *demand*ed to be read at length. And so we did. Memory suggests that on two or three occasions, a small group of us gathered in a round-table classroom after hours, and passed around the NEB, each reading in turn. I recall that a Gospel takes an hour or two to read straight through in this fashion. More frequently, we would read one of the shorter epistles at the end of the night, back in the dorm. Those take 15 or 20 minutes. I remember too on one occasion standing up amidst a large crowd during an impromptu bonfire on the front lawn of campus, and reading from Philippians in this NEB. I took to referencing it by

page number rather than chapter and verse in my papers, to my professors' chagrin. Unfortunately, the NEB is out of print, a market casualty. Furthermore, it was issued as a full Bible or the New Testament, but there is no standalone Gospels.

Back in my hometown after college, I fell in with a young adults' group at church. Consistently and persistently did I answer the question "How can we make this group better?" with the mantra, "Serve beer, and read more of the Bible." Alas, the Theology on Tap meme had not spread far enough yet. Our group fizzled.

I took a crack at this concept a few years later, at a different church. We called it Be Cubed, and the three B's were Bible, bourbon, and bull. I used a donation from one of the church ladies to buy a box of the just-published *The Books of The Bible* (International Bible Society, 2007). This edition takes *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) and does a few interesting things with it. It sets it in one column, with screened out chapter/verse ranges in the footer, and unnumbered endnotes. Its real innovation is in its gerrymandering of the books. For example, the New Testament is organized as four streams, each headed by a Gospel, and proceeding chronologically within the same sub-tradition. For example, Mark follows with 1 and 2 Peter and Jude. Sadly, the book is ugly. It is set in a clumsy sans-serif with less than half-inch margins, and printed cheaply on paper so thin that the reverse bleeds through. And like the NEB, there is no standalone Gospels.

Some of Be Cubed's more biblically literate participants were put off by the innovations in *The Books of The Bible*, but it did encourage reading long passages instead of isolated verses, and overall it worked well. We called it the Be Cubed Bible, in fact. We had a traveling "Bible study in a box" (a wooden wine crate) with extra Bibles, a bottle of bourbon, and penalty flags. Our pattern was to keep a single book in view at a time, with an emphasis on the Gospels. If Luke was our current book, for example, then each person would read as much of Luke as they had time and inclination that week. "Every man for himself, together," was our motto. When we gathered, we would begin with the single question: "What jumped out at you?" Inevitably someone would volunteer an answer, and the conversation would unfold. And here is where my love of

serendipity is excited. The subsequent two or three hours would take on the character of an improvisation, with each participant playing off the others, the text in front of us providing our chords and scales, our point of both departure and return. Our palette is this wide swath of humanity's central piece of literature. It is animated by the full range of our individual experience and study. We are responding to each other and to the moment—now awkwardly, now heatedly, now transformatively. Challenges are issued. Confessions are made. Realizations are had. Each study is a singular event, never to be published as a study guide with prefab q&a's.

Be Cubed had a good run. We spun off a second group at a bachelor pad in the city, and we took several retreats together. It was an important time in my life and in the lives of 15 or so others. Why did Be Cubed fade away? I was unable to keep up with the pace. The experience emphasized for me that we underestimate the importance of geography for community. I think we deal with something like the inverse square law here:

COMMUNITY POTENTIAL AS THE
INVERSE SQUARE OF TRAVEL TIME

| DISTANCE | TRAVEL TIME | COMMUNITY POTENTIAL |
|-----------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Across the hall | 1 second | 3600 |
| Next door | 10 seconds | 36 |
| Down the street | 1 minute | 1 |
| Next town over | 10 minutes | 1/100 |
| Across the city | 45 minutes | 1/2025 |

Ties of blood or employment or affinity impel us to fight against this friction: I drive to the next town to go to church, I drive across the city to work, I drive further yet to visit my inlaws. What if we found God's community in the people next door? I hope this present work facilitates the attempt to answer that question.

In any case, somewhere along the line I also picked up Richmond Lattimore's *The New Testament* (North Point, 1997), and an edition of *The Four Gospels* published by Penguin (2008). The former is handsomely typeset. It has chapter/verse ranges in the header, and a distinct lack of the overinterpretive section headings that even the NEB possesses in some measure. The Penguin edition overflows with these headings. They are bolded, two and three to a page, with cross-references to the same passage in the other Gospels in italics underneath. The chapter numbers are distractingly large, the verse numbers are rendered inline, and most pages have perfunctory footnotes. The translation is the simplistic Contemporary English Version (CEV). The only interesting property of this edition is that it is a standalone Gospels. Lattimore includes the entire New Testament, though he does place Mark before Matthew.

I have taken inspiration from each of these editions, as well as from other sources, as I shall now detail. In two places—PAGE SCROLLING, and SECTIONS—I believe I am offering something new.



CHAPTER & VERSE—Inspired by the NEB, I set the chapter and verse numbers in the inside margin. These numbers bear no connection to the literary meaning of the text (chapters were added in the early 1200's, verses in 1551), but they are wonderful for cross-referencing thousands of years of scholarship. More to the immediate goal, they facilitate groups of readers locating a passage under discussion.

ORDERING—With 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 it moves faster, which is encouraging when one is starting a book. 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 understood to have been written first.

PAGE SCROLLING—I invented this device to aid in navigating the Gospels. 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 of the tab is proportional to the size of that Gospel. Open the book again, and the numbers next to the tabs 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 in flipbook fashion, the chapter numbers “scroll” down the side of the page. This helps to quickly locate 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 was inspired by the work of Edward Tufte. It began life as a sparkline at the bottom of the page, before evolving to its current form.

PUNCTUATION—In the spirit of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (Knopf, 2006), I removed single and double quotation marks, and I replaced semicolons with commas. In one sense this is a fad, but in another sense this is 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*, the scope is here limited to the four Gospels. I chose this limit not only in the interest of time, but also because my expectation is that for those unfamiliar, the Bible as a whole or even the entire New Testament is too

daunting. I would hate to think that the Gospels were not being read as a result.

I encourage any reader to read anything—New Testament, Bible, Gnostic texts, other apocrypha, other scriptures, 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 in each case, and to make it easy to divide up a Gospel over multiple sessions of a reading group. I call these *sections* because the word *chapter* is already taken. They 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, and because they actually break the page. These are designed to feel like chapter breaks in a Steinbeck novel, giving one a place to stop if one really must get to bed, but at the same time drawing one onwards—“Just one more chapter!” There are 34 of them altogether, and their size varies considerably, according to the semantic requirements of the text.

TRANSLATION—The text presented here is the *World English Bible* (WEB), which I chose as the best translation in the public domain. It is a literal translation, a light modernization of the original American Standard Version (ASV), 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 <http://www.ebible.org/>.

I regard as secondary the question of which translation to use. The interested person will have several translations in their library, and which one to begin with is arbitrary. The less interested person will not appreciate the nuances. As to difficulty in reading, this is both overestimated, and ameliorated in a group setting, where better readers can aid lesser readers. I recommend that all but the truly illiterate be expected to participate in shared reading. It builds confidence as well as community.

TYPESETTING—I am not a master typographer, and my strategy has been to mimic the NEB, guided by Robert Bringhurst’s *The Elements of Typographical Style* (Hartley & Marks, 2008, v3.2).

Acknowledgements

My father Rod Whitacre introduced me to the Gospels and to the gospel. He also taught me to read Greek, as did Doug Penney, Art Rupprecht, and Scott Haffemann. Mark Talbot taught me to read books. The Be Cubed crew inspired me to undertake this project, and my wife Jessica and our children—Leah, Miriam, Samuel, and Ruth—have graciously allowed me to pursue it when I did not really have the time. My mother Margaret Whitacre made sure they were okay.

I dedicate this work to my friend and brother, Seth Whitacre. There is no-one I enjoy reading the Gospels together with more.