The Gospels

based on the
World English Bible

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edited by
Chad Whitacre

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Preface

    This is an edition of the four Gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John—that is designed to be read in long passages by local communities. With most Bibles on the market today, one can hardly read a few words without being interrupted by a chapter or verse number, footnote, cross-reference, chart, map, column break, extraneous section title, or pedantic sidebar. This makes it nearly impossible to avoid *proof-texting*, taking individual verses out of context to support foregone conclusions. I want an approach to Scripture that allows the text to shape the life of the specific, local communities that I find myself in. This means reading whole books at a time rather than isolated verses, and it means discussing it together in a group setting. This edition uses an existing translation, the *World English Bible* (WEB), and cuts out the junk so that a community can actually read the Gospels together.

    The *New English Bible* (NEB; Oxford/Cambridge, 1970) has been my main inspiration. I discovered it in a used-book shop in college, and fell in love with it because it is so well-designed. Sometimes a small group of us would take an hour or two to read a Gospel, passing the NEB around the table. Or we would take 15 or 20 minutes to read one of the shorter epistles at the end of the night, back in the dorm. I even remember on one occasion standing up amidst a crowd at a bonfire and reading from Philippians in this NEB. Unfortunately, the NEB is out of print, a market casualty. It

was issued as a full Bible or the New Testament, but there is no standalone Gospels.

My second significant experience studying long passages of the Bible in a community setting came years later, in a Bible study group called Be Cubed. In college we *read* whole books at a time, but in Be Cubed we *discussed* whole books at a time. At any given session we might read as much as a page or two at a time, but it was up to each person to read the full book on their own prior to the meeting. We used *The Books of The Bible* (TBOTB, International Bible Society [IBS], 2007), an edition that 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 screened out chapter/verse ranges in the footer rather than in the margin, and uses unnumbered endnotes where the NEB uses footnotes. The lack of footnotes was welcome, but the removal of chapter and verse numbers to the footer proved to be a step too far, because then it was hard to get everyone to the same spot on the page, especially with some using different translations. However, the most interesting thing about TBOTB is how it reorders the books. The New Testament is organized as four streams, each starting with a Gospel and then moving chronologically through the sub-tradition it represents. For example, Mark is followed by 1 and 2 Peter and Jude. This is the TBOTB's most valuable contribution. I chose to issue the four Gospels together because I think it adds dimensionality to the reality they describe to hold them next to each other, but I could imagine issuing separate volumes for each of the TBOTB's Gospel streams. Sadly, TBOTB is ugly. It is set in a clumsy sans-serif with less than half-inch margins, and the paper is so thin that it bleeds for several pages. The size of the Bible does present a challenge in this regard, especially for a group like the IBS that is focused on mass distribution and is therefore cost-conscious. Issuing multiple volumes would address the challenge but would drive up the cost, and would also deemphasize the thematic unity of the Bible.

I have not used them in a group setting, but two other editions of Scripture also informed my work here: Richmond Lattimore's *The New Testament* (North Point, 1997), and *The Four Gospels* (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. These headings positively abound in the Penguin edition. There 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 the bottom of the page is cluttered with perfunctory footnotes. The only commendable property of this edition is that it does in fact limit itself to the four Gospels, the only one I have found that does so. Lattimore's out-of-print first edition of Scripture (1962) included the Gospels and Revelation.

I have taken inspiration from each of these editions, as well as from other sources, as explained below.

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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 understood 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 readers to find passages. For these reasons they belong on our

page, though for readability I followed the NEB's lead and put the chapter and verse numbers in the margin (though the inside one).

PAGE SCROLLING—To aid in navigation, 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 in flipbook fashion, 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 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 (e.g., *The Road*, Knopf, 2006), I removed single and double quotation marks, and I replaced semicolons with commas. On one view this is a fad, but on another it 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 here is limited to the four Gospels. I chose this limit not only in the interest of time, but also because the entire Bible or even the New Testament could be too daunting for many readers. I would hate to think that the Gospels were being read less simply for this reason.

I encourage any reader to also read anything and everything else—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* 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 break the page. These are designed to feel like chapter breaks in a 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 all told, and their size varies considerably, according to the semantic requirements of the text.

TRANSLATION—I used the *World English Bible* because it is the best translation in the public domain. It is 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.

Which translation to use is not the most important question. The interested person will have several in their library; the less-interested person will not appreciate the nuances. As to difficulty in reading, this is less of an issue in a group setting, where better readers can aid lesser readers. All but the truly illiterate should be expected to participate in shared reading. It builds confidence as well as community. That said, I would welcome other translations of Scripture formatted along these lines.

TYPOGRAPHY—This being my first exercise in typesetting a book, I thought it best to try to mimic 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.

I hope that this book helps you to read the Gospels with others. I hope that in doing so you discover, in the reality of your own community, the freshness and excitement and catharsis of the way of life that Jesus introduced.

—Chad Whitacre
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