

The Gospels

based on the
World English Bible



edited by
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MMXI

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.

Before proceeding, I would like to say that my work here is that of a typesetter and an editor, not that of a translator. For the work of translation, I have relied entirely on the World English Bible (WEB), a public domain text that itself relies on the American Standard Version (ASV). In this book you are getting a high-quality literal translation of the Bible, edited into sections and typeset to maximize group readability. Okay, on to serendipity ...

It all started in college, when I discovered the *New English Bible* (NEB; Oxford/Cambridge, 1970) in a used-book shop. 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' Bible study at church. Consistently and persistently did I answer the question "How can we make this group better?" with the mantra, "Serve beer, and read longer passages." Neither suggestion gained much traction, and the group fizzled.

I revived the concept a few years later, at a different church. We called it Be Cubed, for the three B's of Bible, bourbon, and bull. I used a donation from one of the grandmothers of the church to purchase a case of the just-published *The Books of The Bible* (International Bible Society, 2007). That 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 crate with penalty

flags and Be Cubed bookmarks and extra Bibles. 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 points of 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 made 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 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 would be especially thrilled to learn that this present work makes it easier for immediate neighbors to read the Gospels with one another.

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. These headings abound in the Penguin edition. 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 notably he places 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.



BOOK 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 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 bear scant semantic connection to the text, but they are wonderful for cross-referencing thousands of years of scholarship. More relevantly, they help a group of readers to locate a passage under discussion. 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—I developed 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 and edge-on width 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 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 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 unfamiliar readers, the entire Bible or even the New Testament is too daunting. 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 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 all told, and their size varies considerably, according to the semantic requirements of the text.

TRANSLATION—The text presented here is the *World English Bible*, 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*, 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.

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—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* (Hartley & Marks, 2008, v3.2) for explication of the NEB's technique.



I hope that this book helps you to read the Gospels with others, especially your immediate neighbors. I hope that in doing so you serendipitously 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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