



**FROM CREATION TO  
APOCALYPSE: THE BIBLE IN  
AMERICA FROM THE  
PILGRIMS TO THE CIVIL  
WAR**

Quayle Bible Collection  
Open Saturdays & Sundays  
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# The Word of God in America

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When the first European colonists came to America, they brought with them the foreign religion of Christianity. They brought various Bibles; they interpreted the texts in a new light; and they searched for an authentic American religion. Throughout the history of struggles, war, civil unrest, feminism, Civil Rights, and freedom of religion, the Bible has remained a fixture in American culture; regardless of the multiplicity of interpretation. It has been used for uplifting the downtrodden and it has been used to condemn those who did not deserve condemnation. And although it was originally written in languages that no American speaks, the text is often seen as American as the constitution itself. While the debate of America's supposed Christian founding will forever rage on, there is little debate on whether the founders knew the Bible. The cases before you show a small window into how early Americans used and viewed the biblical text, with some of those traditions continuing into today. Many Americans, such as Herman Melville, interpreted the Bible to show that Americans were the new chosen people of God. The only thing certain is that Americans have created a plethora of interpretations of how the Bible fits in the history of America.

Special thanks to the students who helped guide and assemble this exhibit:

Elise Jamison, Case 1

Conner Petty, Case 2

Kristiaan Edwards, Case 3

Juan Rivera, Case 4

Moses Watson, Case 8

## More to the Story

The north wall contains additional stories connected to the religious development of America. First, there is the less known story of women's attempt to become ministers. Second is Herman Melville, whose story mirrors that of other religious leaders in America. Then we have John Brown and the Exodusters, two stories that have a major impact on the religion of America, but especially Kansas.

### Case 1. Puritans and Pilgrims

The story that is told every Thanksgiving is that the Pilgrims came to America to escape religious oppression from the King; however, it is a little more complex. While they wanted to practice their own religion, their interpretation was staunch and exclusive. This is what led to the burning of non-Puritans and people accused of being witches. They attempted to keep their staunch interpretation of Christianity by educating everyone in the "correct" belief. As a result, the Geneva Bible was their Bible of choice, with all its study notes and its literal translations. One text that was always difficult for them to translate was the Psalms. The Psalms were used in all religious services and needed to be sung; however, you cannot literally translate music. They also believed in mission and conversion, and attempted to convert the Native Americans and slaves. But this salvation was done so for a variety of reasons, such as to pacify their neighbors and to ensure that the slaves were not teaching their own religion to Puritans. This is why Eliot produced the first Bible printed in America. He used his knowledge of the Bible to put Algonquin to the English alphabet. And lastly, the fear of African religions and witchcraft was what sparked the Salem Trials. Cotton Mather, as a witness to

this, urges Puritan slaveholders to do more to convert their slaves to Christianity for the protection of the community.

## Case 2. The Great Awakening

When the American colonies began to grow, there was a surge of diversity in Christianity, especially Quakers and Catholics. On the eve of Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, an evangelical movement began that was spurred by both nationalism and religion. The First Great Awakening was an attempt to unite people under Christianity regardless of class, race, and gender; it confronted traditional beliefs of the past century; and it criticized some of the “freedoms” in which the colonists were engaging. The sermon that typified this time was Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which told colonists that Hell awaited them if they did not repent. Supposedly he was interrupted several times by people pleading for their souls. Preachers like George Whitfield would travel the colonies and preach to anyone who would listen. He later met the Wesley brothers, and they ministered to people in Georgia. Regardless, the Awakening had lasting effects that led to the Revolution.

## Case 3. The King James Bible in America

Undoubtedly, the King James Bible is the most important biblical text for Protestants in America. To the point that many Christians today will only read it. However, with the diversity of Christians in America, it was not the first translation printed. After Eliot’s Algonquin, the German Quakers and Mennonites of Germantown, PA printed the Luther translation in 1743. At this time, all of the King James Bibles were being supplied and printed by Britain. However, when the war broke out, the supply of Bibles was cutoff. In 1777, Robert Aitken began printing copies of the King James New Testament. In 1781, even before the war was over and

the Constitution did not exist, Aitken took his text to the chaplains of the Continental Congress. On approval, they took it to Congress, who approved of Aitken's "pious and laudable act." The King James Bible was now authorized by Congress and was officially printed in America.

## Case 4. The Bible and Early Presidents

The religion of the President of the United States is usually a contested issue. However, there were several presidents who were influenced by religion regardless of their belief. It is widely accepted that Thomas Jefferson was a Deist, believing that a creator made the natural world and then let it run on its own. As a result, Jefferson did not believe in "superstition" and especially miracles. However, he did believe in morality and ethics, and was concerned that most Christians cared more for the sacrifice of Jesus than his words. As a result, he simply cut all the miracles from the Gospels. The sixth President, John Quincy Adams was a Unitarian and believed in the importance of the Bible. This is why he was involved in the American Bible Society at its founding. Maybe because of this, he chose not to swear on the Bible, and instead chose the Constitution. The irony of swearing into office on the Bible is that the Bible discourages it. Lincoln was another President whose religion is disputed. Although he was raised Baptist, he never seemed to join the church. However, he had an extensive knowledge of the Bible, and his life and presidency was full of tragedy and trying issues. Scholars are unsure if the Civil War and the death of his children turned him toward or away from religion.

## Case 5. Native American Bibles

Chief Pontiac of the Ottawa is quoted in saying, “They came with a Bible and their religion, stole our land, crushed our spirit, and now tell us we should be thankful to the Lord for being saved.” Like the Puritans, many colonists used religion in an attempt to pacify the Native Americans on whose land they occupied. The Cherokee went to great lengths to assimilate in hopes that they could remain on their land in Georgia and North Carolina; however, they were removed by Andrew Jackson on the infamous Trail of Tears in 1831. With all of these efforts, most Native Americans converted to Christianity, and in the process, translated the Bible into various languages. In many ways, these new Christians kept much of their traditions and beliefs from before and integrated them into Christianity.

## Case 6. The Second and Third Great Awakenings

In Palmyra, New York, a young man was struggling with what it meant to be an American and what it meant to be Christian. Then an angel appeared to him and told him where to find the Golden Plates that held the answers that he sought. In these plates, it told of a Jewish prophet’s flight from Jerusalem to America, the new Promised Land. Like Joseph Smith, many other Americans were dealing with the idea of what it meant to be an American after the Revolution. The same would happen after the Civil War, when so many Americans would deal with the apocalyptic events. Some Americans returned to the concept of America being the new Israel and attempted to integrate Judaism into Christianity. This is the case for groups like the Seventh Day Adventists who tried to return to the proper teachings

of the Bible by following the rules of the Sabbath and dietary laws.

## Case 7. The Bible and Slavery

No debate divided the country like the discussion of the Bible and slavery. This debate led to the split of so many denominations, including Methodist and Baptist, with the Baptists remaining divided. While the Bible acknowledges slavery, most scholars know that this was a historical issue; however, many slave owners did not agree. If the Bible is speaking to them and their time, then slavery must be accepted like all other issues. In many ways, this became an issue of theology between the Old and New Testaments. Most advocates of slavery used the Old Testament as the authority, while abolitionists looked to the Gospels and Jesus' emphasis on "love thy neighbor." Southerners also believed that Africans were cursed by God and needed to be enslaved. They believed that Noah's son Ham, who was cursed for looking at his father's nakedness in Genesis 9, was the ancestor of all Africans. Harriet Beecher Stowe was central to the debate of the Bible and slavery. She wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, which not only showed the realities of slavery but attempted to show the role of Christianity in freedom. She wanted readers to see that slaves were Christians and that Christian love only accepted freedom. The book incited praise from abolitionists and criticism from slave owners. According to legend, Lincoln himself told Stowe that the book started the Civil War.

## Case 8. The Bible and the Civil War

The United States had never seen anything before and has never seen anything sense like the Civil War. And while slavery was at the heart of the war, it also involved religion,



identity, and culture. The destruction was so cataclysmic that some believed that the Gates of Hell were loosed on the world. When the English Civil War broke out, many thought the end of the world was near. The same could be said about the American Civil War. The Bible was brought with soldiers along the way for protection and for guidance during the dark times. Many preachers became abolitionists, soldiers, advocates for slavery, and political figures, and the Bible and its many interpretations were at the center. In Kansas, John Brown ran his campaign almost as an evangelical terrorist, which would lead to constant attack on cities like Lawrence, even long after Brown's death. One such attack was Quantrill's Raid in 1863, which saw the almost near destruction of Lawrence and the death of 164 civilians. Similar destructions occurred across the nation as if the fires of Hell burned on Earth. Afterwards, the rebuilding of the nation was done poorly and many wounds were left open. As a result, many new denominations of Christianity appeared, emphasizing the "End Times," purity, and healing, such as Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Christ, Scientist.

## Case 9. The Bible and Freedom

Much like some of the new religious groups, African-Americans turned to the Bible and religion to find healing and to find freedom. In many ways, they saw themselves as the tribes of Israel who were placed in bondage and were allowed to be freed by God. Many families stayed in the South and attempted to reclaim their life and identity. Others left in the "Great Migration" for urban centers all over America, like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. While emancipation had occurred, Jim Crow was now in full effect and where they went, African-Americans met violence, segregation, and lynching. Whole African-American only churches and denominations, such as

the African Methodist Episcopal, were created out of need and safety. Towns and settlements began to spring up like Quindaro and Nicodemus in Kansas and Eatonville in Florida, the home of Zora Neale Hurston. Reading the text, people knew that the Bible promised freedom and it promised the reward, but the road would still be long and hard.

## Case 10. The Jewish Bible in America

Jews have been in America since its earliest periods, and they lived throughout the thirteen colonies. They settled in many areas, including the South, where they were slave owners. Some of the Jews who lived in major cities like Atlanta, left after the destruction. After the war, the nation focused on the settlement of the West as an attempt to unify the nation from coast to coast. Many people went west on the various trails, Oregon, California, and Santa Fe, which were slowly becoming railroad routes. Many Jews took these trails before and after the war to try their life in California. America saw a rush of immigrants after the War, and Jews represented a large portion of them. Where Jews went, they did not necessarily need synagogues. To have a religious service, you need certain religious objects and you need ten adult men. This means that Torah scrolls and other scrolls like the Esther Megillat would have traveled with them; however, they needed cemeteries for proper burial. As a result, across the nation there are cemeteries in areas where no communities stayed for long periods of time. With cemeteries also came the Genizah, which was an area that you stored or buried documents that contained the name of God. One such Genizah can be found in Eudora, Kansas. Now that the war was over, Jews and other Americans looked for a new life across the country, but the one thing that remained constant was the Bible remained with them.

## For Further Reading

**The Puritans: A Transatlantic History.** David D. Hall. (2019)

**Jonathan Edwards: A Life.** George M. Marsden. (2004)

**The Bible and the People.** Lori Anne Ferrell. (2008)

**Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers.** Daniel L. Dreisbach. (2016)

**Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction.** Richard Lyman Bushman. (2008)

**The Civil War as a Theological Crisis.** Mark Knoll. (2006)

**God and Race in American Politics: A Short History.** Mark Knoll. (2008)

**White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery.** Vincent L. Wimbush. (2014)

**Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics.** Ted A. Smith. (2014)

**Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction.** Nell Irvin Painter. (1992)

## To Visit:

Drop in for a visit between 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm any Saturday or Sunday. To arrange for a visit at another time or for a group tour, please call the number below.

You may want to consider visiting other sites in Baldwin City such as the Osborne Chapel, the Holt-Russell Gallery, the Old Castle Museum, or the Lumberyard Arts Center.

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