

THE BIBLE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE



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THE BIBLE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

ITS ENDURING INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN LIFE

Edited by

Mark A. Chancey, Carol Meyers, and Eric M. Meyers



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INTRODUCTION

Mark A. Chancey, Carol Meyers, and Eric M. Meyers

“The morality that helped build our country is based on the values that are found in the Bible.... And in my little small way, I want to encourage people to get back into those values.” So explained Tom Hayden, mayor of Flower Mound, Texas, when he announced that 2014 would be the city’s “Year of the Bible.”¹ Hayden directed citizens to a website maintained by a local nondenominational church, Calvary Chapel, which divided the Protestant Bible into 365 sections to help readers work through all sixty-six books in a year.

Hayden’s action predictably drew a mixture of effusive support and angry backlash from various constituents and other observers. He argued that twenty-five area churches enthusiastically backed the measure.² For Hayden and his supporters, the (Protestant) Bible was a source for ethics, civic values, and even American identity. As the Calvary Chapel’s website described it, the mayor’s “desire was to bring our town back to a Biblical foundation which our country was founded and built upon.”³ One resident unswayed by such arguments was a local candidate for the state legislature, who suggested that “by declaring this year the ‘Year of the Bible,’ Mayor Hayden is essentially saying that anyone who is a Muslim, Hindu, Zoroastrian, atheist, or not even his particular brand of Christianity that they are not welcome in this town, which is a value that does not belong in

1. “Mayor Declares 2014 the ‘Year of the Bible,’” FoxNews.com, January 2, 2014. Online: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/01/02/mayor-declares-2014-year-bible-in-texas-city/>.

2. Terry Evans, “Flower Mound Mayor’s Bible Proclamation Draws Mixed Reaction,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 3, 2014. Online: <http://www.star-telegram.com/2014/01/03/5458068/flower-mound-mayors-religious.html>.

3. “Year of the Bible: Flower Mound, Texas.” Online: thebible2014.com/welcome/.

any public office anywhere in Texas.”⁴ For this citizen, the mayor’s official affirmation of the Bible smacked of religious privilege that ignored the diversity of his constituents.

Hayden’s proclamation was directly inspired by a precedent that had likewise generated diverse reactions: President Ronald Reagan’s designation of 1983 as the “Year of the Bible.” Reagan, too, characterized the Bible as one of the primary sources for American identity. According to him, “of the many influences that have shaped the United States of America into a distinctive Nation and people, none may be said to be more fundamental and enduring than the Bible.” For him, the Bible offered “resources of spirit” more precious than those of “technology, education, and armaments,” resources needed by America as it faced “a decade of enormous challenge” and the prospect of being “tested as we have seldom, if ever, been tested before.”⁵

The Flower Mound mayor’s office is not the only government unit to try to follow Reagan’s 1983 example. Pennsylvania made 2012 “The Year of the Bible” to the praise of some and the chagrin of others.⁶ A Georgia legislator urged President Barack Obama to make 2010 the “Year of the Bible,” crafting a resolution claiming that the “priceless, timeless message of the Holy Scripture ... has unified, healed and strengthened its [e.g., America’s] people.”⁷ Cities where similar declarations have been introduced or debated include Miamisburg, Ohio in 1997 and Truth or Consequences, New Mexico in 1998.⁸ Municipalities seeking a smaller scale observance

4. Eric Nicholson, “The Mayor of Flower Mound has Declared 2014 the ‘Year of the Bible,’” *Dallas Observer*, January 2, 2014. Online: http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2014/01/its_officially_the_year_of_the.php.

5. Ronald Reagan, “Proclamation 5018: Year of the Bible, 1983,” February 3, 1983. Online: <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/20383b.htm>; Curtis J. Sitomer, “Does ‘Year of the Bible’ Cross the Church/ State Line?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 2, 1983. Online: [http://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0502/050235.html/\(page\)/3](http://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0502/050235.html/(page)/3).

6. “Pennsylvania House Names 2012 ‘Year of the Bible,’” *Church & State* 65 (2012): 22.

7. Associated Press, “Georgia Republican Wants Obama to Make 2010 Year of the Bible,” *FoxNews.com*, May 22, 2009. Online: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/05/22/georgia-republican-wants-obama-make-year-bible/>.

8. Jeremy Leaming, “Ohio Mayor Rescinds Bible Year Proclamation After State ACLU Objects,” *First Amendment News*, Jan. 5, 1999. Online: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/ohio-mayor-rescinds-bible-year-proclamation-after-state-aclu->

than a whole year might opt instead for a “Bible Week,” as Gilbert, Arizona did in 1997.⁹

Such efforts and the controversies they generate reflect old and ongoing tensions in American society regarding the Bible and its role in public life. Most Americans in the Founding Era were Protestants, but they did not explicitly and formally incorporate bibliocentric Protestant theology into their new national governmental framework. Instead, they adopted the First Amendment, with its prohibition of any congressional law “respecting an establishment of religion” or “prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Although such provisions initially applied only to the federal government, they would later come to apply to states and cities as well. But Americans have never agreed entirely on what “an establishment” or “free exercise” of religion means, with the result that proponents of measures such as a “Year of the Bible” can cite the Free Exercise Clause for support while opponents can appeal to the Establishment Clause.

Jews and Roman Catholics may have been small in number in the colonial era, but immigration in the following century expanded the sizes of both groups as well as that of Eastern Orthodox Christians. The resulting religious diversity complicated the notion of what the Bible is, since each of those traditions has its own canon. Clashes over the role of the Bible in public life even escalated to violence on occasion, as happened in Philadelphia in 1844 when Protestants and Roman Catholics battled over the reading of the King James Bible in local schools.¹⁰

Yet the religious diversity of that era does not begin to compare to that of the present. Subsequent immigration, particularly following the Immigration Act of 1965, has resulted in the presence of so many different religious traditions from around the globe that Diana L. Eck’s already classic book, *A New Religious America*, is subtitled *How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.¹¹ Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox Christians may have differed over

objects; Sue Anne Pressley, “Year of the Bible Brouhaha: Church-State Debate Comes to Truth or Consequences, N.M.,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 1998.

9. *Arizona Civil Liberties Union v. Cynthia L. Dunham*, 88 F. Supp. 2d 1066 (1999).

10. Joan DelFattore, *The Fourth R: Conflicts over Religion in American Public Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 32–46.

11. Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

the form, translation, and interpretation of the Bible; but adherents of most other traditions reject its authority altogether.

The 1960s brought another significant shift regarding the place of the Bible in American society: the Supreme Court's prohibition of public-school-sponsored Bible reading in *Abington v. Schempp*.¹² Coupled with the court's related decision on school prayer the preceding year,¹³ *Schempp* signaled the increasing secularization of public education and of other spheres of American culture as well. At the same time, however, it affirmed the worthiness of the study of religion in public schools as long as it is conducted from an objective and secular perspective.

Opposition to increased secularization and unease with changing religious demographics are no doubt partly responsible for "Year of the Bible" measures. Yet such measures are indisputably accurate in their general characterization of the Bible as enormously influential in American culture. For better or for worse, changing demographics and legal landscape or not, the Bible in its various forms is still a source of artistic, literary, ideological, philosophical, and, needless to say, religious inspiration today. The essays in this volume explore some of the roles in the public square that the Bible has played in the past and continues to play. They employ a range of methodological perspectives (American history, the history of ideas, film studies, visual studies, cultural studies, education, church-state studies) to explore four themes: the Bible and politics, the relationship between the Bible and notions of American identity, the Bible and popular culture, and the treatment of the Bible in public education. This collection of essays is aimed at a broad audience consisting not only of biblical scholars but also of those in other academic disciplines as well as educators, students, and the general public.

This volume is based on a conference held at Duke University in 2012. Recognizing that the Bible was, is, and probably will continue to be an important part of American life, the conference was organized in order to highlight the diverse ways the Bible appears in various aspects of national culture. The papers presented over the course of two days were then posted on the Duke University website.¹⁴ But the conveners felt that the conference videos were not sufficient to convey the rich scholarship and

12. *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

13. *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

14. "The Bible in the Public Square Conference Videos: Session 1, The Bible in Presidential Politics," Duke University Center for Jewish Studies, September 9–10,

provocative ideas that characterized the presentations. They thus decided to have the papers prepared for publication so that readers would have access to the expanded—and also refined, as the result of the discussions built into the conference program—versions along with documentation. The four sections of this book cover the themes that were explored in the conference.

The first theme, “The Bible and Politics,” appears in part 1. Because 2012 was an election year, the issue of the Bible and presidential politics was addressed in the opening lecture of the conference and now is the lead article of this volume. Jacques Berlinerblau documents the increasing use of “God talk” and scriptural references in the last three presidential elections, elements of religiosity that reflect a backlash against secularism in the public arena. He traces the reemergence of the Bible as a rhetorical resource in American presidential campaigns. This trend, retriggered by the candidacy and subsequent presidency of George W. Bush, presents unique challenges to exegetes. Among these is the strange fact that much of the specialized training that marks the great achievement of professional biblical scholarship is of relatively little use in clarifying the markedly flat, at times anti-intellectual, and seemingly politically motivated way in which both Democrats and Republicans invoke Scripture. After identifying basic ground rules and conceptual tools for scholars to use when trying to make sense of campaign “God Talk,” this paper compares the use of the Good Book in political oratory in recent campaigns. In so doing, it identifies new rhetorical developments and explores their significance for America’s understandings of the relationship between church and state.

The second paper in part 1 explores the intersection of the Bible and politics in relation to foreign policy. Yaakov Ariel examines this intersection as it appears in the Middle Eastern policy of the United States. He shows how politics concerning the land of the Bible have been influenced by evangelical Christianity, which often supports the Zionist endeavor, frequently to the exclusion of support for Arab causes; his article also identifies the shortcomings of such reasoning. Ariel provides vivid details about the way biblical imagery has played a decisive role in shaping conservative Protestant understanding of history as well as its hopes for the future and the details of its eschatological scenarios, all of which have

2012. Online: <http://jewishstudies.duke.edu/the-bible-in-the-public-square/conference-videos>.

a bearing on their understanding of the purpose of the State of Israel. Because evangelical Christians often view the Bible as containing “God’s plans and purposes in the ages,” they tend to read the Bible more literally than liberal Christians, and many of them have adopted a premillennialist faith. Many consider the Jewish people to be heirs and continuers of biblical Israel and as a people destined to fulfill an important role in the events of the end times. Likewise, such Christians typically view Palestine as ground zero of the apocalyptic events prophesied in the Bible. Because they have expected the return of the Jews to Palestine and the building of a Jewish commonwealth as essential stages that precede the second coming of Christ, they welcomed the rise of the Zionist movement, despite its secular character, and were likewise supportive of the State of Israel. Since 1967, conservative Protestant theological and physical involvement with Israel has increased considerably. The evangelical Christian millennialist faith has played a growing role in determining the political stand of this segment of American Christianity towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and the developments in the Middle East in general.

The three essays in part 2, “The Bible, America’s Founding Era, and American Identity,” which explore the relationship between the Bible and notions of national identity in the United States, complement the two papers in part 1. In the first, “Does America Have a Biblical Heritage?” John Fea explores how the Bible was used by public intellectuals in the eighteenth century and then explains how both the Left and the Right have co-opted the country’s religious history, albeit in different ways, in the current “culture wars.” He makes it clear that any serious student of American history must take into account the powerful role that the Bible has played in the collective life of the nation, but he also insists that we should also be wary about approaching that history with a celebratory mindset informed by what he calls “the heritage crusade.” His essay explores the role the Bible played in the founding of the United States. He has argued in another publication that it is difficult to make the case that the United States was founded as a Christian nation.¹⁵ Here he asks if it was founded as a biblical nation. What role did the Bible play in the founding era—the years leading up to the American Revolution, the Revolution itself, and the Revolution’s immediate aftermath? He cuts through

15. John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

the political rhetoric of the Christian heritage crusaders and tries to make some historical sense of the complicated ways in which eighteenth-century patriots, founders, and loyalists utilized the Bible in the midst of the imperial crisis with England.

The second paper in part 2, “‘God’s New Israel’: American Identification with Israel Ancient and Modern,” echoes many of the ideas presented in Ariel’s paper in its consideration of the favored position of Israel in current Middle Eastern policy. Within the framework of two disciplines—the history of ideas and the history of religion—Shalom Goldman examines three related phenomena in Protestant American culture: Christian Hebraism, the idea of the promised land, and evangelical Christian Zionism. Drawing on case studies that represent both “high” and “low” cultural productions, he traces the sequential development of these phenomena in the history and culture of the United States and concludes with informed speculation on the future of the “special relationship” between the State of Israel and the United States.

The third essay in part 2, “The Image of the Protestant Bible in America,” provides a segue to part 3. David Morgan considers American identity in the colonial period by focusing on the Bible’s place in visual expressions of authority, where it held a central place until it was later supplanted by the American flag. Whatever the Bible may be as a text or collection of texts, it also has a career as an image in the history of representations in American culture, a history that consists of the circulation of images in many arenas, including advertisement and commerce, entertainment, religious instruction, devotional literature, and proselytism. Morgan traces the visibility of the Bible in popular illustrations from the late eighteenth century to the present. He shows how the image of the book was put to use in popular piety from the private home to the public square. The Bible as object and image became one of the most widely recognized and readily evoked symbols of authority throughout late colonial period and in early national American life. Eventually it was eclipsed by the American flag, which underwent intense sacralization in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth to become the nation’s preeminent icon within the rising civil religion. Yet the image of the Bible remains primary in nationalistic iconography and is often closely associated with the flag by those who champion the idea of America as a Christian nation.

The three essays in part 3, “The Bible and Popular Culture,” provide further examination of the place of the Bible in several widely dissemi-

nated cultural productions.¹⁶ The first essay, “Holy Words in Hollywood: DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and American Identity,” uses an iconic film, *The Ten Commandments*, as an exemplar of how Hollywood, no less than the Puritans of an earlier era, drew on biblical themes to express cultural values. Adele Reinhartz shows how DeMille’s classic film projected an image of America as a savior in the international community. *The Ten Commandments* served as a Cold War manifesto that refashions Moses as a Jesus-like redeemer figure who symbolizes the American struggle against the Red Menace. The paper contrasts DeMille’s triumphalist view by concluding with reflections on films made after the Vietnam War. The biblical imagery in those films are much more critical of America’s role in foreign affairs, as illustrated by the 2007 film *In the Valley of Elah*, which concerns the American army in the era of the Iraq war.

The role of the Bible in psalms and hymns is examined in the second essay in part 3, “History, Memory, and Forgetting in Psalm 137.” David Stowe approaches this topic by tracing the role of the text of Ps 137, which begins with the words “by the rivers of Babylon,” in song and hymn in the United States from revolutionary times to the present. “By the Rivers of Babylon” has served as America’s longest-running protest song, lending support to anticolonial movements since the American Revolution. Its most prominent use in the United States has been in antiracist movements. Psalm 137 has also been used to express alienation and marginalization of a more private, existential variety. Stowe show how the three distinct sections (vv. 1–4; vv. 5–6; vv. 7–9) of the psalm speak to different situations and have been put to different uses. The first four verses conjure up communal memories of better times remembered in moments of dislocation and humiliation. The two middle verses, which take the form of an oath calling for paralysis of tongue and hand if the psalmist forgets Jerusalem, have been of particular interest to political movements that invoke collective memory to mobilize collective action. The last three verses call for vengeance and have usually been excised in the North American contexts. In whole or in part, Ps 137 has been widely adopted in Christian contexts, and recent popular culture shows increasing Jewish use of the text.

16. An earlier publication of the Society of Biblical Literature focused on the Bible in music and in literature; see Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright, *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter* (Semeia Studies 65; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

The third essay in part 3, “Comic Book Bibles: Translation and the Politics of Interpretation,” provides an analysis of comic books, specifically, comic book Bibles, as a medium of popular culture. Rubén Duperuis shows how biblical materials are translated into a format that merges the printed word with pictorial illustrations, and he explores the often problematic meanings or values transmitted in this medium. He explains in this essay that all translations involve the process of replacing one set of cultural signifiers in a source text with a different set of signifiers that can be understood by readers of the target language text. This cultural transaction is inherently messy and imprecise, requiring translators to choose between foregrounding the cultural distance to the source-language text or privileging the values and cultural assumptions of the target-language reader. He argues that comic book Bibles, which should be understood as translations of the Bible into the comics medium, provide a useful arena in which to explore contemporary battles over the meaning and value of Bible.

The fourth theme, the treatment of the Bible in public education, is addressed in the two essays of part 4, “The Bible and Public Schools.” The first essay, “Battling over the Bible in Public Schools: Is Common Ground Possible?” is concerned with the role of the First Amendment and related legal issues in determining the way Bible courses enter the curricula of public schools. Well aware that there is more religion in public schools in the United States now than at any time in the past century, Charles Haynes focuses on recent conflicts over Bible electives in public schools. He considers whether the consensus guidelines on the Bible in schools, published by the First Amendment Center in 2000, helped educators resolve disputes and create constitutionally sound Bible courses. He also assesses the impact of “Bible bills” passed in six state legislatures on local school districts in those states and lays out the challenge for educators to “get it right” in the curricula of public schools.

The second essay in part 3, “Public School Bible Courses in Historical Perspective: North Carolina as a Case Study,” is a fitting sequel to Haynes’s contribution. Mark Chancey traces the place of the Bible in education, using practices in North Carolina as an example. He has chosen that state for his case study because it has unusually rich source materials for some historical aspects of its Bible courses. At the same time, what has happened in North Carolina probably illuminates national trends. Chancey examines public school Bible courses in their larger historical context. He first considers their relation to the older practice of Bible reading and then the

creation of Bible courses as a part of early twentieth-century religious education programs. He also discusses another important factor, the impact of the 1963 United States Supreme Court decision *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* and subsequent related lower court rulings. He concludes by describing efforts to define the characteristics of constitutionally permissible courses and by noting the basic contours of the present situation.

A third paper on this topic, “Rightly Dividing the First Amendment? An Evaluation of Recent Decisions regarding the Bible and Public Schools,” was presented at the conference. The paper’s author, Melissa Rogers, was at that time the Director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs of the Divinity School of Wake Forest University. She was subsequently appointed by President Obama as Special Assistant to the President and Director of the White House Office on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The demands of her new position meant she was unable to prepare her conference paper for publication. Her paper considered the role of the First Amendment in court cases across the country regarding the Bible and public education, focusing particularly on the issues of Bible distribution (as done by Gideons International, for example) and students’ right to free expression (such as student selection of the Bible as the subject of her oral presentation on her favorite book). With her training as a lawyer, Rogers was able to assess the extent to which those lower court rulings correspond to Supreme Court precedents. She also outlined practical paths for students, parents, schools, and other parties to follow when faced with new controversies. A video of Rogers’s presentation can be accessed at the conference’s website.¹⁷

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17. “The Bible in the Public Square Conference Videos: Session 5, The Bible and Public Schools,” Duke University Center for Jewish Studies, September 9–10, 2012. Online: <http://jewishstudies.duke.edu/the-bible-in-the-public-square/conference-videos/session-5-the-bible-and-public-schools>.

the conference; and the editors are grateful to Professor Goldman for his wisdom in selecting topics and speakers. We are also thankful to have had the cheerful and expert assistance of Serena Bazemore, Program Coordinator of the Duke Center for Jewish Studies, who skillfully handled the myriad details involved in organizing the conference. Finally, we want to extend our appreciation to the Publications Staff of the Society of Biblical Literature for accepting our proposal to publish the conference papers and then expertly shepherding the manuscript through the publication process.

