

# Making Money from the Bible

*David Parish* looks at how the Bible was produced in the Christian era, starting from the first century papyri, and traces the prices charged, first by scribes, then by monastic houses, then by printers. The earliest Bibles were too expensive for the merchant class, but by the late middle ages wealthy families could buy them. Finally, with the the printing press, ordinary labouring families could afford them.

At every major Christian Conference one of the features is a vast bookstore selling everything that the well-informed Christian would need: themed bookmarks, the latest ‘best seller’ from Phil Yancey, Max Lucado or John Lennox, notebooks for journaling and a vast array of Bibles of every shape, size and price.

We take it for granted that we can have any one of the six most popular modern versions as well as the King James Bible. There will be niche Bibles in special editions for men and women and youth. There will be study Bibles with wide margins for all our insightful notes.

One of the best-sellers in America at present is the ‘Patriot’s Bible’, with its selective re-telling of American History in the interleaved pages of notes, together with quotes from the Founding Fathers. The British do not come off very well in this version!

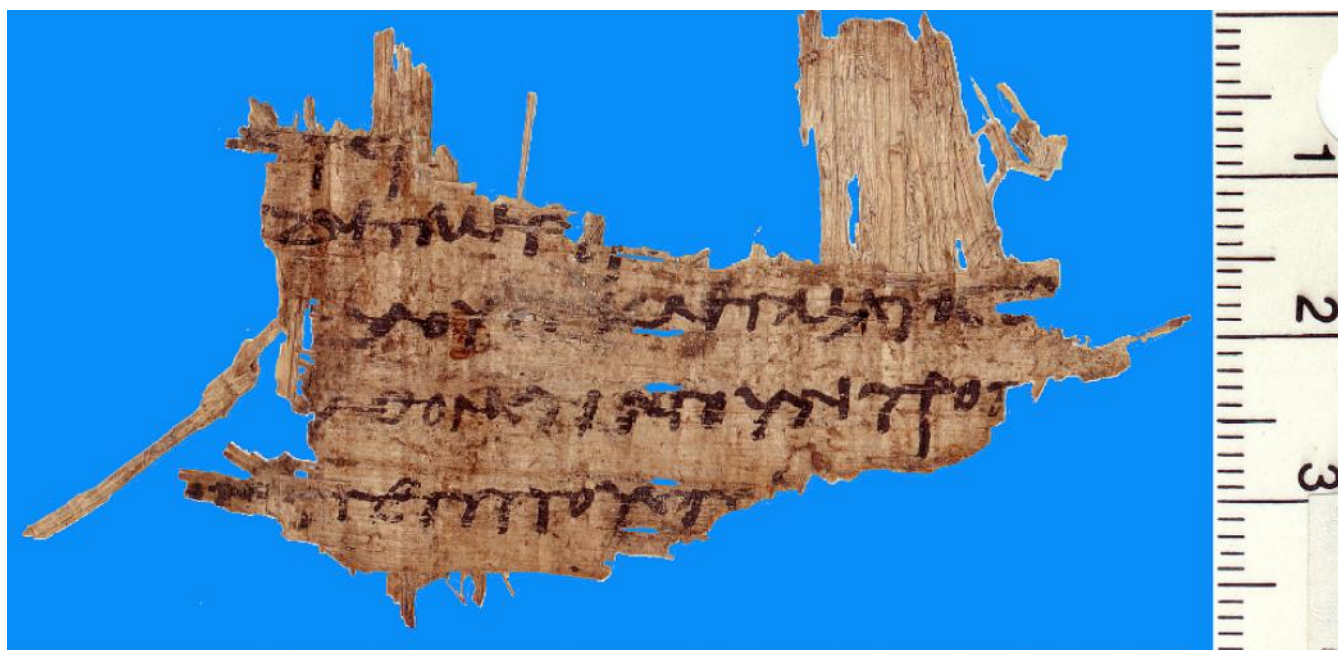
## The Early Church

In all of this we hardly think about how the early church managed to get copies of the Greek and Hebrew versions of the Jewish Bible, which is what Paul and the other apostles used.

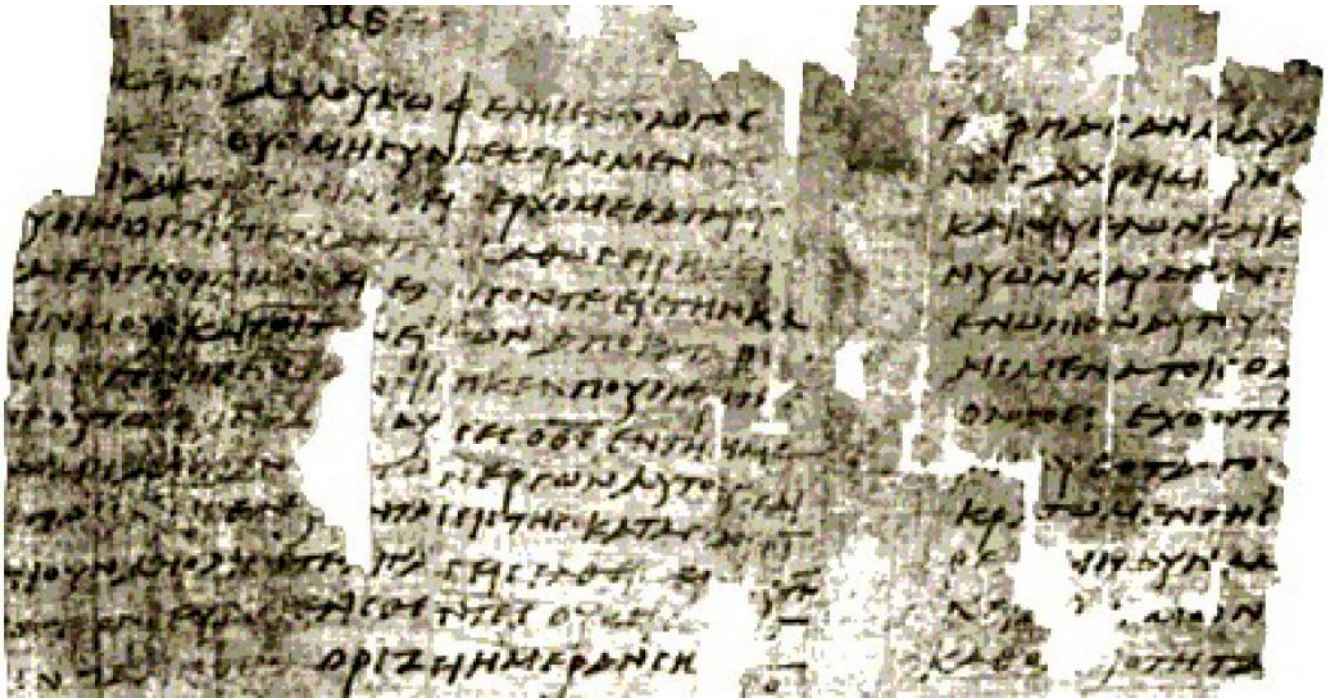
In the first century there were no major publishing houses with the

economic might of today’s Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press in the UK, and Zondervan, part of the News International Group, and Nelson, part of the Thompson Group, in the USA.

Despite this by the end of the second century there were at least several thousand gospels, parts of Paul’s letters and those of other apostles in circulation. The number is based on the fact that in various libraries around the globe today there are fragments of around 5000 of those letters and lectionaries dating from the first to the tenth century. There are five fragments from the first and



1st century gospel papyrus fragment, from a 2007 report by Professor Robert A. Kraft, University of Pennsylvania



Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 13 with part of the Epistle to the Hebrews on one side and the *Epitome* of Livy on the reverse

second centuries still in existence in libraries in Dublin and Manchester. We know that the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered the burning of thousands of Christian writings and those that ended up in France and Italy would have decayed. The fragments that we do have were preserved in the dry climates of North Africa and the Middle East<sup>1</sup>.

New Testament scholars Philip Comfort and Bruce Metzger have written extensively on how these fragments were originally written and preserved, and how they were found by 'Bible Hunters' like Grenfell and Hunt in the 1900s.

Given that this was the age of hand-copied documents, a key question is: How did so many documents get 'published'? Who published them? And more intriguingly, who bought them and at what price?

From the fragments it is known that there were 'master copies', the originals or 'autographs', which were dictated to a scribe. Paul seems to have done this with his letters and signed them (see e.g. 2 Thess 3:17)<sup>2</sup>.

Philip Comfort's research has also shown that some papyri were written with quite a crude hand. These might

have been personal copies by an educated person but one who was not trained as a scribe. Others were written by a trained hand but who was not a professional scribe. These might have been done by the house scribe of a wealthy merchant who kept a scribe to write legal or trade documents. In Romans 16:1 Paul includes a note of commendation for Phoebe, who may have been a merchant.

Some of the copyists were lecturers employed by the early churches and bishops to read the scriptures to largely illiterate congregations. They would often make notes in the margin to help their reading. These copies were kept by the local bishop, which is why many of the most extensive collections of New Testament documents were found in church libraries<sup>3</sup>.

If you were a member of the Church of Alexandria, wanted to buy a copy of a letter, and assuming you were able to read, what would it have cost?

There were two elements to the cost as is the case today - the material on which it is written and the cost of production of the text. A text found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt was written on the reverse side of a poem by Livy

the Roman poet. A likely explanation is that a senior soldier from Rome came to Egypt, and wanting to know more about this new faith, he had a scribe copy the gospel on to the back of parchment he already owned in order to save cost.

Karel van der Toorn has studied how much the scribes were paid, and their rate of work, to calculate a possible cost. Modern experiments suggest a trained scribe would need just under a minute per line. A manuscript of 3000 words would therefore take around 50 hours.

A scribe's social status was quite high, so they would have earned at least double the daily pay of a labourer. They produced various texts of antiquity like the Gilgamesh Creation Story as well as parts of the Jewish Bible. A gospel would cost a month's wages for a labourer and the parchment roll a similar amount, so they would only be bought by the wealthy educated elite or by a local bishop.

Van der Toorn includes a story of a thief who stole a Torah scroll and sold it for 80 pieces of silver. The man who bought it then sold it on to a third party for 120 pieces of silver<sup>4</sup>.

Parchment was expensive and it was often re-used. This was done by scraping off the top layer of writing and then writing the new document. These are called 'rescriptus documents'.

At present Tyndale House, the Biblical Research Centre in Cambridge, is working on deciphering an ancient parchment which is a 'rescriptus' codex. It is one that has been written on several times, and by using modern technology it is possible to read the various layers. The top writing of this 137 leaf manuscript is in Syriac and contains two works by John Climacus, a sixth-century head of St Catharine's Monastery in Sinai. To write this, a scribe from around the ninth century used parts of manuscripts from eight previous manuscripts, which are now known as CCR1-8. Two of these contain Greek text, some of which has previously proven too difficult to read. The Greek covers parts of the Old Testament and Gospels, with the latter comprising a form of text that contains mysterious omissions<sup>5</sup>.

By the second century the scroll was being replaced by the codex. These were books created by binding sheets of parchment or papyrus with cord between two leather covers. This was more practical for carrying; it was easy to read and cross-reference without having to unroll a scroll, which in the case of one of Paul's Corinthian letters would have been about six feet long. Paul when writing to Timothy (2 Tim 4: 12) asks him to bring the books and parchments. The Greek word for parchment is *membranii* (plural) which implies separate sheets, so Paul may have been using an early loose-leaf version of his letters.

There are only a few New Testament codices still existing and they are so valuable that they are not even on display in museums; but some, like the Codex Sinaiticus, are available on-line.

These codices and individual documents continued to circulate. It is known that by the time Ireneus became Bishop of Lyons (177-202 AD) he was familiar with all of the New Testament documents we have today. After the fall of Rome it is not known how the documents were produced or circulated, but in the remote desert monasteries of Sinai and Syria the existing documents were kept safe in their libraries.

With the restoration of the western church under Pope Leo and Charlemagne, the

production of Bibles was given to the monastic orders. All the larger ones had *scriptoria* where monks would work for months on beautifully produced and decorated gospels. As the common people were deemed unworthy to read the scriptures for themselves, only

the very wealthy were able to buy Bibles for use in their private chapels. It may be more accurate to say the common people were thought incapable of understanding the Bible without explanation from the priestly elite. There is no record of what the monastic houses charged for these private Bibles, but no doubt they added to the income of the monasteries. However from other sources it is known that books were a high-cost item. In 1345 a book cost £1. At that time, board for a student at Oxford cost £5 per annum and a good horse £10. Today board and lodging at Oxford costs around £4000 per annum and a good horse about £5000. The impact of the printing press on reducing the price of books is clear<sup>6</sup>.

### The Impact of the Reformation

This year the Protestant churches will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, when in October

1517 Martin Luther presented his 95 points of contention with the organisation and teaching of the Roman church. One of his key desires was to have a Bible not in a Latin that only the educated knew, but in a lively colloquial German. He set about doing this translation himself.

In this aim he was to be aided by the latest technology. Johannes Gutenberg around 1440 invented the moveable type printing press, using screw press technology, similar to

that used for wine presses, to press an inked plate against the sheets of paper.

Luther realised this would enable his Bibles and other writings to be made affordable for most people. Luther needed a reliable printer and he found one in Hans Lufft.

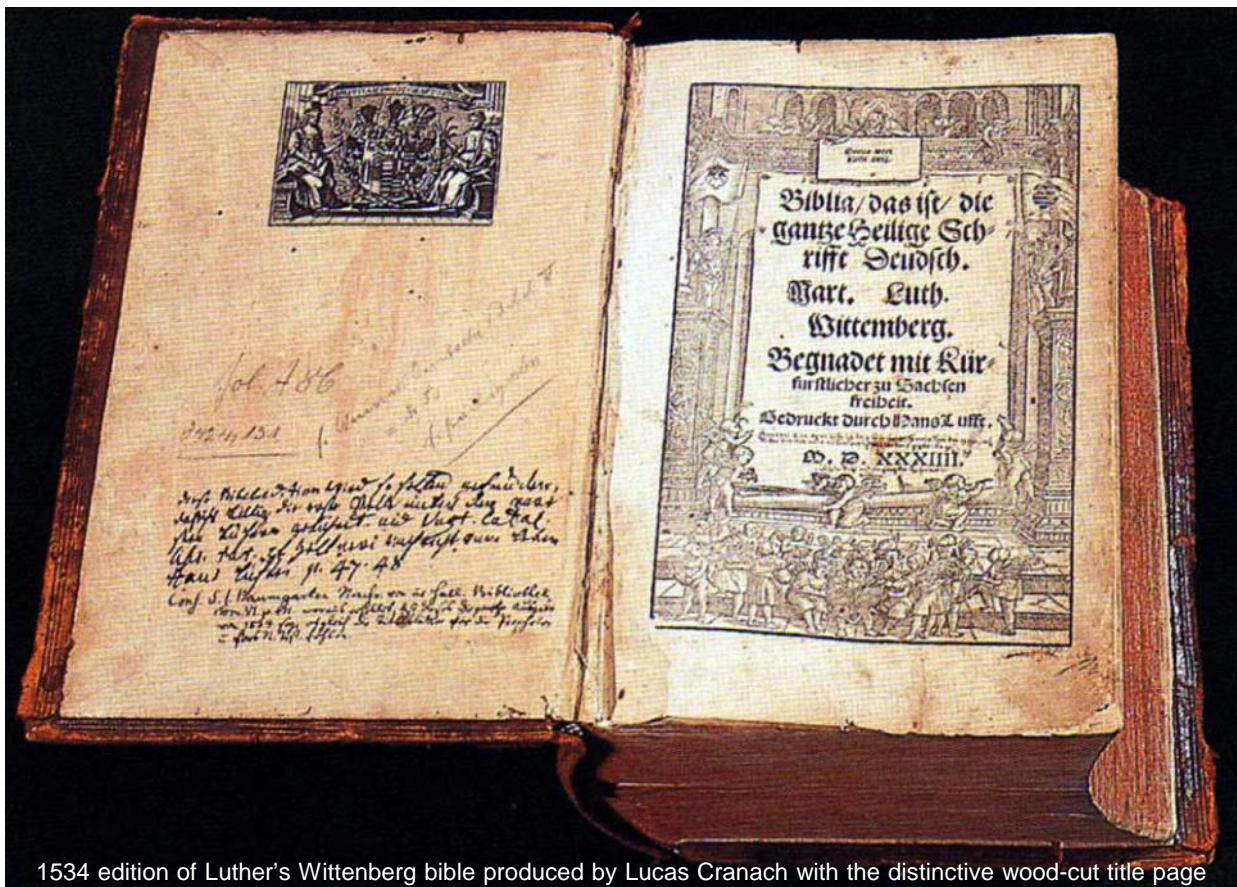
Hans Lufft was born in 1495 but it's not known

where he learned his craft or the location of his birthplace<sup>7</sup>.

In 1525 he was entered in the Wittenberg Residents Book (*Schossbücher*) as a non-native resident ('*unbeerbte Bürger*'). In the same year he was registered as an inhabitant with resident rights ('*Inwohner der Bürgerrecht hält*') and by 1528 he was a full citizen. About this time he set up his own workshop. His income at first was small and in 1526 he paid only 21 Groschen in tax for his works. This compared with engraver Lucas Cranach who paid 3 Schock, 1 Groschen. However by 1528 Lufft was paying 1 Schock, 10 Groschen, and he bought a house<sup>8</sup>.

By 1531 he had bought various properties. On his death these were worth 1000 Gulden. By 1545 he was also a council member and magistrate and by 1566 he was Bürgermeister. Each of these offices had remuneration.

**'... the common people were thought incapable of understanding the Bible without explanation from the priestly elite.'**



1534 edition of Luther's Wittenberg bible produced by Lucas Cranach with the distinctive wood-cut title page

The source of his wealth was his exclusive rights to Luther's translation of the Bible and Luther's many pamphlets and books. Even though pirated copies appeared from other printers he still managed to amass wealth, property and prestige. Luther was outraged by the open pirating of his works but as there was no copyright law at that time, there was nothing legally he could do, other than preach against the pirates. "For Christ's sake I beg all of you who are down there committing my sermons to memory or paper not to print them until they have my own draft, or until I have printed them here in Wittenberg"<sup>9</sup>.

To try and protect the authenticity of the Luther Wittenberg bible, Lucas Cranach produced a distinctive wood-cut title page for the 1534 edition with a rose symbol that was hard for other printers to copy. This had the approval of the Duke of Saxony who was keen to protect his printers.

Lufft's press produced Bibles by the thousands and they could be bought

for about two weeks' wages by a labourer. Literacy grew as people wanted to be able to read the Bible for themselves. There were also luxury editions printed for the wealthy, which cost around £500 in today's money, similar to what you would pay now for a bespoke goatskin bound bible, embossed with gold lettering and with a wide margin, printed on the finest India paper. Lufft was praised by Gustav Georg Zeltner for the beauty of the typeface, and the fact that it was very clear and black<sup>10</sup>.

The translation of the Bible into German stimulated other vernacular translations across Europe. William Tyndale had to flee from Henry VIII's reach to Germany and Flanders in order to continue his work on his English translation. His wording and style can be seen in the King James Version and subsequent versions down to the English Standard Version today. It has been estimated that 30,000 of his quarto-sized bibles were smuggled into England by merchants sympathetic to the Reformation. They were then sold by

booksellers to customers they knew and could trust. They were well used by their owners, and burnt when seized by Henry's agents, so there are only three copies held in libraries in Britain and Germany.

One person to lose money on printing and publishing a Bible was Robert Barker, the King's Printer for James 1. It is not known quite what went wrong with his edition of the Authorised Version but to recover the loss he had to sell land and property and also share the rights to future editions with rival printers. However, his rival printers also undercut him by importing Bibles from the Continent, and as he was also a poor manager he eventually ended up dying in a debtors prison.

Ironically, today depending on its condition, you would have to pay an antiquarian book dealer between £500 and £5000 for a Robert Barker printed KJV<sup>11</sup>!

## Recent Developments

The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded in 1804 to provide low-

cost Bibles in Welsh. This was largely in response to the story of Mary Jones. Mary was a young girl who walked 28 miles each way from her home in the Welsh hills to Bala to buy a Bible for which she had saved her pennies for six years. Her determination is now commemorated with a hiking trail named after her, and a visitor centre in Bala.

Across the Atlantic, the United Methodist publishing house by the 1890s became one of the largest businesses in America. The income came from publishing the works of John Wesley and various editions of the King James Bible. In 1896 the sales were £6m which is about £150m today<sup>12</sup>.

In the 1900s the British and Foreign Bible Society were so keen to get low-cost English Bibles into the hands of ordinary workers that often they put their printers, who were usually small or mid-sized craft print shops, under immense financial pressure. In 1925 a Biblical scholar wrote to the BFBS offering to produce a new translation in English as he felt the translation by James Moffatt in 1911 was not accurate enough. In response the acerbic General Secretary stated that he was sure that such a publication was not needed. During the following decade, with the prompting of some of the

regional BFBS groups, the BFBS did agree to the Revised Standard Version being published in cooperation with the International Council of Religious Education. This became very popular and widely used<sup>13</sup>.

In order to try and gauge what is happening today I interviewed Don Kraus, the Vice-President of Oxford University Press through an email exchange. He was unable to give information on the profitability of their Bible Publishing Division but confirmed that the copyright holders of the various translations (like the National Council of Churches for the NRSV, and the International Bible Society for the NIV) receive royalties for each copy sold.

He also confirmed that the OUP Bibles are now printed domestically in the USA and Korea.

The ESV (English Standard Version), owned by the imprint Crossway Books, print most of their cheaper editions in China to save cost. The Nanjing Amity Printing Company is now the world's largest Bible printer.

The most successful modern paraphrase, with over 20m sold since publication, has been *The Message* written by pastor Eugene Peterson and published by NavPress. It appears in multiple editions and Don

Pape of NavPress pointed out that in 2018 it will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> year of publication. The latest edition is the 'Canvas Bible', an adult colouring book version. There is also a NavPress Youtube video of Patterson discussing *The Message* with the musician Bono.

Today we take for granted that we can buy the Bible in many sizes, translations and editions. With people wanting more portability, the main publishers now offer online editions for phones and tablets. In the case of the NLT (New Living Translation) they sell almost as many mobile versions as print, and in the month it came out it sold more than game apps.

In print the pocket formats are increasingly popular. As Don Kraus pointed out in an article for *Publishing Weekly*, it is close to the format favoured by the frontier circuit rider preachers of early Methodism in America<sup>14</sup>. It is estimated that 100 million Bibles in print and media formats are sold worldwide every year. It is still the world's best-selling book, and the entrepreneurial skills of the publishers mean that it is reaching new audiences at affordable but profitable cost. However, I don't think I will be spending \$20 on the Patriot's Bible edition! 

1 Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, B. & H. Academic, 2005, p.56.

2 Op.cit, p.6.

3 Comfort, p.287. See also David Trobisch 'Paul's Letter Collection' and Peter Head, 'The Claudius Tertinius Letter Collection', *Tyndale Bulletin* 65.2, 2014

4 Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the making of the Hebrew Bible*, Harvard University Press, 2009, pp 18 -19

5 <http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/codex-climaci-rescriptus>.

6 <http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/medprice.htm>

7 Wolfgang Meir, *Hans Lufft: Der Büchendrucker*, Leipzig Press 1923 p 4

8 Op.cit., p.5.

9 Martin Luther, *Allgemeine Werke* 17/2, pp 3-4

10 Hans Lufft, p.6.

11 [http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/kingsprinter/publications/transcripts/Reader\\_Aids/Kings\\_Printing\\_House.html](http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/kingsprinter/publications/transcripts/Reader_Aids/Kings_Printing_House.html)

12 See my article 'The Christian Entrepreneurs: Business Expansion in America', *FIBQ* 16:4.

13 Leslie Howsam, 'Cheap bibles', *TL&S*, 12 June 1992.

14 Don Kraus, *Publishers Weekly*, Oct 12 1988



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