

Sunday, November 3, 2019— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 98 Johann Gutenberg and the Printing Press

### **Introduction**

- In our previous three Lessons ([95](#), [96](#), & [97](#)) we were looking at the life, career, and translation of John Wycliffe.
- Today in Lesson 98 we will be turning a corner out of the manuscript period and into the period of the printed text. We will do this by looking at the Historical Turning Point of Johann Gutenberg's Printing Press.
- In order to accomplish this purpose, we will be looking at the following points and subpoints.
  - Before the Advent of Printing
  - The Printing Press Changed the World
    - Gutenberg: Inventor & Businessman
    - The Gutenberg Bible
    - The Man of the Millennium: The Printing Press as a Turning Point
  - Bible Printing in Transition (“The Cradle of Printing”)
    - Incunabulum: And the English Bible
    - The Early Printing Industry in England
  - Conclusion

### **Before the Advent of Printing**

- Much of what we have discussed thus far in this class in terms of historical details when it comes to preservation and/or transmission fits into what is called the Manuscript Period or the time before the advent of the printing press. The Greek MSS of the Byzantine majority, lectionaries, early versions, and patristic quotations have all come down to us via handwritten copies. This includes the Gothic Bible, Latin Vulgate, Anglo-Saxon Gospels, and the Wycliffe Bible. Basically, any textual witness before the year 1455.
- During the Manuscript Period, preservation and transmission were characterized by the following features:
  - Written texts were preserved on handwritten scrolls or codices made out of papyrus or vellum (animal skins).
  - Most often these copies were inscribed at monasteries, cathedrals and/or universities.

- Writing by hand in this manner caused scribes to focus on memory training so that they could limit how many times they needed to look up from their work and consult their exemplar.
- Monks made imperfect copies when seeking to reproduce their source texts or exemplars.
- During the Middle Ages, outside of the Greek speaking Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) most works were transmitted in Latin thereby limiting access to these handwritten MSS.
- For these reasons, demanding *verbatim identity* of wording in preservation/transmission is excessive. Please recall the following observations from previous Lessons:
- Given the Biblical data as well as the historical and textual FACTS, the following points are inescapable:
  - God promised to preserve His word.
    - Psalms 12:6-7; 105:5; 119:89, 111, 152, 160; Isaiah 30:8; 40:8; Matthew 24:35; I Peter 1:23-25
  - God did not see fit to preserve His word by preserving the original autographs.
    - This is self-evident because the originals no longer exist.
  - God did not supernaturally over-take the pen of every scribe, copyist, or typesetter who ever handled the text to ensure that no differences of any kind entered the text.
    - Differences exist at every level of this discussion.
  - If the standard for preservation is “plenary,” “pristine,” or “verbatim” identity, why did God not just preserve the originals and thereby remove all doubt.
    - The reason is that God wants people to walk by faith in their view of the Biblical text.
- The extant historical witnesses bear out that God did not preserve his word in a state of *verbatim identity* during the manuscript period. This does not mean, however, that God’s promise to do so failed. Rather it means that our understanding and/or expectations of the doctrine of preservation should not outstrip what God’s word teaches about the *extent* of preservation.
- The invention of the Printing Press in the 1450s by Johannes Gutenberg was a game changer in terms of the preservation/transmission of God’s word.

## The Printing Press Changed the World

- Roger B. Beck and the authors of *World History: Patterns of Interaction* state the following regarding the historical impact of Gutenberg's Press:
  - “The Chinese invented block printing, in which a printer carved words or letters on a wooden block, inked the block, and then used it to print on paper. Around 1045, Bi Sheng invented movable type, or a separate piece of type for each character in the language. The Chinese writing system contains thousands of different characters, so most Chinese printers found moveable type impractical. However, the method would prove practical for Europeans because their languages have a very small number of letters in their alphabets.

“During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, block-printed items reached Europe from China. European printers began to use block printing to create whole pages to bind into books. However, this process was too slow to satisfy the Renaissance demand for knowledge, information, and books.

Around 1440 Johann Gutenberg, a craftsman from Mainz, Germany, developed a printing press that incorporated a number of technologies in a new way. The process made it possible to produce books quickly and cheaply. Using this improved process, Gutenberg printed a complete Bible, the Gutenberg Bible, in about 1455. It was the first full-sized book printed with movable type.

The printing press enabled a printer to produce hundreds of copies of a single work. For the first time, books were cheap enough that many people could buy them. At first printers produced mainly religious works.” (Beck, 484)

- In a cutout titled “Global Impact” at the bottom of page 484 Roger B. Beck and company state the following regarding how the printing press increased book production:
  - “A copyist took five months to produce a single book. One man and a printing press could produce 500 books in the same amount of time.” (Beck, 484)

### *Gutenberg: Inventor & Businessman*

- Bible collector and historian Donald L Brake states the following regarding Gutenberg and the Bible that bears his name:
  - “Johann Gutenberg has long been recognized as the printer of the first Bible—no later than 1456 and probably 1454-55. This towering monument to the craft of printing is now the most sought after printed book in the world. The romance and mystery of its production has the fascination of all bibliophiles.

Johann Gutenberg was born at the turn of the fifteenth century into a middle-class German family in Mainz. Very little is known about his early life, but apparently the family moved to Strasburg during his childhood. He was trained as a gem polisher and goldsmith, but in the mid-1430s he began some experiments in conjunction with “artificial writing.” By 1437 he became involved with Ennel von der Iserin Thuere, who he is thought to have married after being sued by her for breach of contract. Gutenberg's modest resources dwindled as he secretly worked on his invention, and by 1442 he was in

debt. As one author describes the situation, “Gutenberg’s modest inheritance was swallowed up, not by drinking, dandyism, or debauchery, but by his research work.” No patent laws existed to protect inventors, so most of his early work on moveable type was done in secret by train and error.

Lawsuits followed as creditors sought to collect for monies spent on presses, metal punches, molds, and lead. Gutenberg’s refusal to divulge his use of money to the course resulted in their attributing his spending to “unbridled whims.” In order to recoup some of his expenses, Gutenberg printed twenty-four different editions of Donatus’s Latin grammar, four calendars, a German translation of a papal bull, and a missal. His reputation as a printer grew, but the accompanying funds were not enough to retire his growing debt.

Gutenberg’s associate Johann Fust, later a printer himself, loaned Gutenberg 800 guilders (a master craftsman earned 20 to 30 guilders per year), and among enable him to begin printing the Bible. By 1452 when the operation was ready for production, the 800 guilders were spent, and another 800 guilders had to be borrowed. Fust, now a partner in the printing business, demanded paying in 1455 after the Bible was printed (at least partially) but before it was sold. The total debt including interest reached 2,026 guilders. Fust, seeing a business opportunity, repossessed the press, Bibles, and shop.” (Brake, 70-72)

- So, due to unsound business practices and mounting debt (2,026 guilders), Johann Fust, an investor, repossessed the press, Bibles, and shop. According to Donald L. Brake, author of *A Visual History of the English Bible*, after 1457 no printed document can be attributed to Gutenberg. Fust and Schoeffer, however, both gained immediate international fame as printers, but eventually Gutenberg, by virtue of his association with the famous Gutenberg Bible, would be remembered as the greatest printer of all time. (Brake, 72)
- “Gutenberg, destitute and forgotten, died February 3, 1468, in his native Mainz. By 1500, a mere thirty-two years after his death, Bibles from printing presses were found in seventeen European countries. Towns with presses grew to 260, and there were 1,120 printing offices. Almost forty thousand different works in various editions totaling more than ten million copies had flooded the market. Clearly Gutenberg had an impact.” (Brake, 72)

### *The Gutenberg Bible*

- Gutenberg’s enduring fame as a printer is tied to the Bible that bears his name. Regarding this famous volume Brake states the following:
  - “The Gutenberg Bible is the most beautiful piece of printing art ever produced and the most valuable printed book in the world. Hand-bound in two volumes, there were 648 pages in the first volume and 634 in the second. An illuminator handwrote the first letter of each chapter and the headings. Each copy, individually illuminated, makes every copy a unique piece of art. Gutenberg’s Bible is truly a living legacy to a great man, not in his own time but in God’s. . . The quality of the Gutenberg Bible was such a superb example of beautiful typography, it was through by critics to have produced later. . . While it is quite possible some of these minor pamphlets could have been printed before the Bible, and while even Gutenberg probably printed minor works as a trial run, the Gutenberg Bible must be considered the first major book. In 1471, shortly after the death of Gutenberg, the rector of the University of Paris, Guillaume Fichte, heaped great praise

upon Johann Gutenberg and credited him with the invention of printing (Brake, 73). . . Today forty-seven copies of the Gutenberg Bible are evidence of its enduring quality. Twelve are printed on vellum and the rest on paper. It is believed that there were originally about two hundred copies printed, twenty of which were on vellum. The most famous copy of the Gutenberg is called “The Mazarin” copy. The rubricator’s note established the latest possible date for its publication. The note reads, “This book was illuminated, bound and completed by Henry Cremer, vicar of the collegiate church of St. Stephens of Maguntum (Mainz) in the year of our Lord one thousand, four hundred and fifty-six, on the feat of the Ascension of the Glorious Virgin Mary. Thank the Lord. Alleluia.” . . . Johann Gutenberg’s careful attention to detail and technical achievement, and his desire to print an accurate and complete text, guaranteed his success.” (Brake, 75-76)

### *The Man of the Millennium: The Printing Press as a Turning Point*

- Brake concludes his section on “Gutenberg’s Legacy” with the following paragraph:
  - “Johann Gutenberg’s careful attention to detail and technical achievement, and his desire to print an accurate and complete text, guaranteed his success. Gutenberg’s contribution to printing made him *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Millennium.” The Message of God’s Word in Latin—and within a few years in other languages too—and the format for its printing made the Bible’s availability possible for all.” (Brake, 76)
- In my World History and Geography class we teach the advent of the Printing Press as a major turning point in history for the following reasons:
  - The Late Renaissance—contributed to the humanist concern for reviving classical knowledge and wisdom by making classic texts more available.
  - The Reformation—Luther’s writings “went viral” due to speed of the press. Sola Scriptura as the true source of legitimate authority worked well with the new power to print the Bible. Protestants stressed the importance of all believers reading the more readily available Bible in the vernacular language.
  - The Scientific Revolution—New knowledge of the observed world was spread by the printing press. For example, Nicolaus Copernicus published his heliocentric theory of the solar system in his work *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in 1543.
- In addition, the Printing Press directly contributed to an increase in literacy rates, the standardization of national languages as printers moved away Latin in favor of the vernacular languages and forging of national identities around the power of a shared language.

### **Bible Printing in Transition (“The Cradle of Printing”)**

- The time period between the printing of the Gutenberg Bible in 1454-56 and 1500, is known as “incunabula” a term which refers to printing in its infant stage. Regarding this important stage Donald L. Brake states the following:
  - “The style of handwriting used by scribes in the manuscript period became the basis for the design of printed fonts. After 1500 the letters took on a form that simplified printing

and reading. It was similar to our change in a letter “a” from handwritten form “a” to printed form “a.” Books in printed form were often looked upon with disdain while handwritten copies were considered superior. The incunabula helped to bridge the gap from a handwritten book to a printed book. Some have suggested that Gutenberg’s obsession with printing a magnificent copy was to win over the skeptics who were devoted to the beautiful manuscript form of writing.

All printed books were formatted like the hand-written manuscripts. The detailed abbreviation used by the scribes appear in the incunabula period, a special sign language developed with marks to indicate omission of vowels, case endings, and conjunctions. These produced clean margins that framed the page.

Unlike the book you are holding in your hands, the earliest printed books did not contain title pages with title, date, or publisher. When printers began to date and sign their publications, it was placed at the end of the book in the form of a “colophon. The first colophon appeared at the end of the Mainz Psalter of 1457. It translates from the Latin as follows:

“The present book of Pslams, adorned with beauty of capitals, and sufficiently marked out with rubrics, has been thus fashioned by an ingenious invention of printing and stamping, and to the worship of God diligently brought to completion by Johann Fust, a citizen of Mainz, and Peter Schoeffer of Gernsheim, in the year of our Lord 1457, on the vigil of the Feast of Assumption.”

The fully developed title page was introduced in 1462.

Woodcuts, a means of illustrating biblical stories, had been in practice for many years. The first printed book to be illustrated with woodcuts was the Edelstein Bible that appeared at Bamberg in 1461. Although some unsuccessful attempts were made by Gutenberg to print in colored ink, it did not become common until about 1490.

The printed book emerged in its modern form with a title page bearing the author’s name, title, page, place of printing, and date by the end of the incunabula period (1500). Each page was numbered, engraved initial chapter letters, and occasionally illuminated letters beautified its pages.” (Brake, 76-77)

### *Incunabulum: And the English Bible*

- Brake reports that following regarding the printing of English Bibles between 1456 and 1500:
  - “A special incunabulum must be mentioned before we leave this period. The Golden Legend (1483) was the first attempt to print parts of the Bible in the English Language. It is surprising to find that not a single Bible was printed in English in the incunabula period (1456-1500). This is very strange in light of the vast number of Wycliffe Bibles available for printing. In fact, no complete English New Testament was finished until Tyndale’s work in 1525—but that story is for later. The possible heretical association with the Wycliffe Bible among the clergy and the probations of the *Constitutions* of 1408 undoubtedly prevented printers from entering the highly charged controversy.” (Brake, 79-80)

### *The Early Printing Industry in England*

- In 1475 the art of printing came to England when William Caxton translated and printed Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* in English.
  - "Instead of printing the "forbidden book," he chose the safe route by printing a surrogate of the biblical text. The popular medieval work consisted of the lives of saints from the texts of Genesis, Exodus, and passages from the New Testament. . . As popular as it was in the late fifteenth century, the English *Golden Legend* could not survive when the English New Testament came on the scene. Caxton's successor, Wynken de Worde, also issued editions of the *Golden Legend* in 1493, 1498, and several in the early sixteenth century. The last *Legend*, published in 1527 became "a quite and long-lived relic," whose partial biblical text in English avoided the early prohibitions of Bible publishing in England. Its demise was due to that availability of the complete Bible in English just one year before the last edition in 1527. However, it was the primary source of biblical teaching in print for the English-speaking world for more than forty years." (Brake, 80)

### Conclusion

- The development of the printing industry in the later half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century set the stage for the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
  - "A well-developed and successful printing business at the end of the fifteenth century set the stage for the beginning of the Reformation age and its battle for the Bible. The 1492 and 1495 small quarter editions of Koberger were known as "Poor Man's Bibles." These unadorned, simply printed, and inexpensively produced volumes were for use by the layperson. Although not completely successful, the "Poor Man's Bibles" served a transition to a Bible that would soon be available for the masses.

This period of the assembly line Bibles (1455-1500) ends the era of the beautifully hand-copied and elaborately illuminated Bibles. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Bibles were printed for the purposes of reading; they were no longer seen as sacred objects of worship. What was lost in art was gained in access. Soon the printing press would begin rolling out Bibles for everyone to read and drink from its deep well of spiritual truth. The soil was soft and tilled—ready for the seed of the Reformation." (Brake, 81-82)

### **Works Cited**

Beck, Roger B., and Others. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal Littell, 2007.

Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.