

The Bible, but not as you know it

By Stephen Tomkins

Most people think of the Bible as a densely printed book with no pictures, but a version of the scripture that resembles a glossy coffee table magazine aims to change that. It's part of a wave of radical presentations of the Bible, including a manga version and a Lego gospel. But how do Christians feel about these attempts to spread the word?

It's the kind of magazine you might find in a doctor's waiting room next to Cosmopolitan or Reader's Digest. On the front is a pale face heavy with mascara. A flick through throws up striking images: urban flooding, a Nigerian abattoir, a girl eating noodles, a pooch in a limo.

It's only when and if you get round to reading the text that the incongruity strikes you: "Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven." What kind of problem page is this?

Bible Illuminated is the latest attempt to bring the Bible into the modern world. In the format of a 300-page glossy magazine, it contains the whole text of the New Testament in a popular translation, with no chapter or verse numbers.

The images are by turns beautiful, violent, oblique and provocative - much like the book itself.

The text "She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus" is illustrated with a veiled Muslim. One verse has a photo of a pair of knickers draped over high-heeled shoes, sending you back to the passage to find out what it's really about.

The person behind this remarketing of holy writings is Dag Soederberg, a Swedish businessman. And contrary to expectations, he is not a Christian hoping to convert anyone. "I'm not on a mission from God," he explains. "I'm not particularly religious. I'm not telling anyone they should believe."

What he sees in the Bible is a profitable chance for people to look again at their world. "We are all affected by it," he says. "Morals are based on it, rightly or wrongly, government, laws. I'm saying to people: this is your history, read it.

"It's the most sold book in the world, but the least known. I want to take it off the shelves and put it on the coffee table."

It's the kind of thing that might provoke tuts and headshaking in the pews, one imagines. "Some people will feel it's dumbing down,"

says David Ashford of the Bible Society, an organisation that exists to "make the Bible heard". "How can it be the Bible when it's got Angelina Jolie in it?"

He, however, welcomes it with open arms. "You have to understand that what we think of as the traditional serious-looking leather-bound Bible is actually a relatively new format. In the Middle Ages, picture books - with people in contemporary dress - were the way most people read the Bible.

"At first the Bible was a collection of scrolls, then illustrated handwritten volumes. When printing was invented they were produced in Latin with pictures. Later they were published in plain closely printed text, in the common language, to get them into as many people's hands as cheaply as possible."

So, ironically, Soederberg's attempt to popularise the Bible by getting away from its traditional format is exactly what the people who created that format were doing.

If you're looking for an alternative way into the Bible, there's no shortage of versions to choose from. Here are some of the more unusual:

1. The Jesus Loves Porn Stars Bible

This arresting title is the work of the XXXChurch, an organisation that on the one hand helps people addicted to porn, while on the other hand taking the gospel into the porn industry. They print this Bible to give out free at porn shows and industry conventions, distributing over 15,000 in 2007.

2. The Manga Bible

The British Christian Ajin-bayo Akinsiku, known as Siku, tells the whole story in the form of a graphic novel. Cain says to Abel, "Whassup, bro?" Noah loads animals onto the ark, saying, "That's 11,344 animals? Arggh! I've lost count again. I'm going to have to start from scratch!" Christ strides out of the desert like a Marvel superhero.

It skimps on some of the less bloodthirsty episodes like the sermon on the mount, but Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is a fan, liking the way it conveys "the shock and freshness of the Bible".

3. The Bible in Cockney

The rhyming slang version of the Bible was written by Mike Coles, an RE teacher in Stepney, and started life as stories he told to his classes. In it, Jesus feeds "five thousand geezers" with "five loaves of Uncle Fred and two Lillian Gish". The Lord's Prayer morphs from "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory" to "You're the Boss, God, and will be for ever, innit?"

This one got the seal of approval of Rowan Williams's predecessor George Carey, who grew up in London's East End, so must have known what he was rabbit and porking about.

4. The Brick Testament

This less-than-reverent online version by Brendan Powell Smith tells stories from the Bible using Lego. It started life in 2001 with stories from Genesis and today contains 391 stories with 4,214 illustrations. Though it is sometimes satirical or tongue-in-cheek, it is often used by churches and Sunday schools, and it's one of the versions that the Bible Society has welcomed as connecting people with the Bible in a new way.

5. Inspired By The Bible Experience

And for the iPod generation, you can get the whole thing on your MP3 player, read and performed by a Hollywood cast, including Forest Whitaker as Moses, Cuba Gooding Jr as Jonah, and a possibly typecast Samuel L Jackson as God.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this new wave of Bibles is how sympathetic the church is to people messing about with its sacred scriptures, whether in wording or binding, no doubt reasoning that there can be some good in anything that gets people hearing its stories.

But how successful these versions are at doing that is another question. The makers of the Bible Illuminated claim it has increased sales of Bibles by 50% in Sweden - though we are not told over what timescale. A version that could achieve such figures in the UK would be one of the most surprising Bibles yet.

Send us your comments using the form below.

I'm sorry Sharon, Croydon thinks it is sacrilege. I'm a Methodist preacher and am very happy for the Bible to be presented in any way that enhances interest and understanding. I think God has a sense of humour, too.

John Bedigan, North Shields, England

I'm from Turkey. I wish they would do the same for the Koran, make it more friendly and easy to read with lots of photos.

Ayşe Sarıcı, Tekirdağ, Turkey

As I'm an artist as well as a Christian, I like them. One of our Sunday school kids has a manga bible. I've also bought a version of the Graphic bible. People are more likely to read a glossy magazine format, than something too wordy. As long as general doctrine isn't compromised.

Lydia Helene Irving, Wallasey

Absolutely ridiculous! Just another way for people to cash in on a religion!

Andrew, Newquay

Well, there's a planetful of literature out there debunking the Bible, so why not have the other side of the story set out in a contemporary and "hip" way? Next thing might be adverts on the sides of buses!

Gareth Pugh, Leeds, UK

All this about alternative (and *ahem* not entirely reverent) translations, and no mention of the LOLCat bible? This is a wiki-based project to translate the bible into the internet dialect LOLCat. Although it is being produced for humorous purposes, it means that people are trying long and hard to understand passages in order to translate them in the most appropriate way possible.

Hann Bunn, Barnsley, UK

"You will know My name the lord, when I lay my vengeance upon thee!" Ezekiel 25-17. Will Samuel L Jackson be doing ads for Big Kahuna Burger next?

Joshua Davies, Cardiff

Soederberg's attempt is clearly not altruistic, a businessman looking for his slice. Hence the easy triviality of his and other versions mentioned. It hardly matters to the Church, they don't believe half of what the Bible teaches. Didn't the main character of the Bible teach: "you received free, give free"?

Charles, Helsinki, Finland

I love these alternative presentations - it's just like what Jesus did, He went into the countryside and told people the Good News by using their language and culturally appropriate stories, these new examples are our culture's ways of expression, so in my opinion it is doing what Jesus said 'God and preach the Gospel to all nations.'

M T, Cambridge, UK

The Bible is such a lively book! Of course there is nothing wrong with 'translating' the Bible for different sub-cultures... this is after all what Christians have always done. It is just now we can add a glossy finish :o) No matter how you present it in the end and to who the message is still the same and will never change; its always relevant!

Andrew C, Newport

If it gets the good news out to people, and those people give their lives to Christ, then I am all for it. Those that believed are command to preach the gospel to all of creation, and I am sure God allows them to use their creativity to do so.

Logie Urquhart, Cambridge

Once again people make a mockery of Christianity. None of the old religions - Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, etc - have ever changed their "good books" in any way, shape or form to "modernise". This is why Christianity will always be a joke and the other religions something serious and strong. The old faiths would never stand for anything like this to happen. It is sacrilege!

Sharon, Croydon

Name

Your e-mail address

Town/city and country

Your comment

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