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Episode 6 - How are you similar or different to a modern Bible today?

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In our final Episode of "If Books Could Talk..." we examine leaves from two medieval Bibles. Many Bibles and Bible leaves survive from the Middle Ages and it is not unusual that the University of Iowa Special Collections holds several of them. As you can imagine, the Bible was a book that was copied regularly and often for a variety of audiences.

Looking at medieval Bible leaves raises a simple, yet interesting question:

"How similar or different are you from a modern Bible today?"

* Originally published in Omeka: http://thestudio.uiowa.edu/historycorps/exhibits/show/books/episode-6---how-are-you-simila
Watch the video here and read more about the manuscript below!
BACKGROUND

We have selected two leaves to discuss today, one made in France around 1150 (xfBS389.075 1943) and the other made in England sometime in the 1240s (xMMs.Bi3). The first comes from the Book of Kings (Book III), which was divided into four books in the Vulgate Bible. The second leaf is from the book of Maccabees (Book II). Of the four books of Maccabees, only the first two appeared as part of canonical scripture in the Vulgate Bible. While the exact origin of the first leaf remains unknown, we do know that the second came from a Bible produced in the workshop of William de Brailes, a book producer working in Oxford, England 1238-1252.

Margins from both Bible leaves. Iowa City, University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, xfBS389.075 1943 and xMMs.Bi3.

CLUE 1 - PAGE LAYOUT

The many components that contribute to analyzing the layout of a page readily apply to medieval manuscripts as well as to books we buy or read today. Such things as margin size, number of columns, size of lettering, organizational structure, images, reading aids, and page numbers provide information about the person who made the book, the

1 The 1150 leaf comes from a collection of Bible leaves entitled "Original Leaves from Famous Bibles: Nine Centuries 1121-1931." The University of Iowa acquired this edited collection from Otto F. Ege circa 1940.
assumptions he or she brought to its construction, and the assumptions of the book’s intended readers.

The 1150 and 1240 leaves both have large margins, especially on the bottom and foredge sides. In this way, readers could write notes and comments as they saw fit. Funnily enough, neither of the leaves featured in this episode have much marginalia, which means that perhaps these two examples were not heavily used.
Both the medieval leaves have two columns on each page and the 1240 leaf has numbered columns (1431 and 1432) instead of numbered pages or folios. Notice the number four. This was the medieval script for the arabic numeral 4, quite different from the one we use today. The lettering on both leaves is relatively small and condensed in order to get as much text on a single page as possible.

Reading aids provide evidence that someone thought carefully about how to organize access to a given text. In our medieval leaves, there is a very simple organizational structure that helps the reader access the Bible books through differentiated chapters. Each chapter is marked by a large red and blue initial. While there are some roman numerals to accompany the flourished initials on the 1150 leaf, these were not common until the thirteenth century and may have been entered at a later date. Rubrication within the text to signify the beginning of a new sentence (as seen in the 1240 leaf) became more practiced in the thirteenth century as well. Stephen Langton (1150-1228), archbishop of Canterbury, is believed to have been the first person to organize the Bible's books into the chapters that appear in modern versions today.

Neither of these medieval leaves has original folio or page numbers to help the reader access information quickly. The 1150 leaf has folio numbers, but these were likely added in the twentieth century for convenience. The folio numbers suggest that the 1150 leaf was part of a whole book at one point and was later broken up to sell off as single leaves. While the 1240 leaf has no folio/page numbers, it does have its original column numbers to help guide the reader. As for other reading aids, we can find certain passages marked with decorative line-and-dot patterns, probably as a means to highlight or drawn attention to a particular passage.

When we look at the 1950 Bible and compare it to the medieval leaves, it is fascinating which aspects of page layout, language and decoration have remained consistent with medieval practices and which ones have adapted to a more modern audience. Page layout remains similar. The margins are somewhat smaller, but there are still two columns of smaller text in order to get several words on one page and keep the length of the book shorter and the overall weight of the book lighter.

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The biggest differences between the medieval and modern Bibles appear when we look at language and reading aids available to the reader. The medieval leaves are in Latin,
the language of the medieval church and universities. The modern Bible has been translated into many languages. For English-speakers, this first happened in 1380 when John Wycliffe, the leader of a religious group called the Lollards, believed that the common person should have access to reading the Bible instead of depending on a priest or other cleric to interpret it for him or her. Thus Wycliffe worked on an English translation for his followers and was condemned as a heretic for it by the Catholic Church. Wycliffe's ideas however took greater hold a century later when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses onto the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. One of the 95 statements was so bold as to suggest that the Bible be read by parishioners and thus translated into vernacular languages to facilitate this.

CLUE 3 - READING AIDS/DECORATION

The Reformation (1517–1648) successfully created a new readership for the Bible, a popular and more public audience. This helps to explain the multiplicity of Bible translations today, as well the increased number of reading aids that appear on Bible pages. As noted, neither of our medieval leaves is highly decorated, apart from the flourished initials. The people reading these folios were most often scholars and clerics well-versed in the Bible's texts. They did not need a lot of reading aids or illustrations, with the exception of the odd manicule (hand shape that points to a particular passage) of course.
The modern Bible, however, not only has clearly numbered pages, but also numbered chapters and verses for each book so that even less-experienced readers can gain easily access to a particular passage. Sometimes notes and cross-references have been added in side and bottom margins to guide the engaged reader in making connections with other sections of the Bible or modern geography. Moreover, a modern Bible page often includes a short summary that recounts the main subject of each page.
This is not to say that no Bibles from the middle ages had illustrations or reading aids. The *Bibles moralisées* for example have rich illuminations and were predominantly made for illustrious patrons such as kings and queens. As for the modern-day Bible, we have only to think of the illustrated Bible for children. But again, in both these examples, the reader is the important factor that determines the way a book looks and its design.

CONCLUSION

While the Reformation brought changes to Bible readership and design, the invention of moveable type for use with the printing press (1450s) transformed the way the Bible was produced and disseminated. More Bibles could be printed in a shorter timeframe for a much wider audience. In fact one of the first things of the presses in Mainz, Germany was what is now known as the Gutenberg Bible. The printing press helped to shape the Reformation and the number of Bible readers increased exponentially. But what our research has shown here, is that the readers themselves are the ones who helped to shape the format and design of the text.

The next time you pick up any book, think about yourself as a reader and how that book is or is not speaking to you! If you have learned nothing else during this series, you have certainly learned that books talk, if only we can listen!