

THE Bible IN America™ MUSEUM Newsletter

Houston Baptist University

January-March 2005

Vol. 2, Issue 2

“I do solemnly swear...”

When George W. Bush is sworn into office for his second term on January 20, 2005, he will repeat thirty-five words specifically required by the U.S. Constitution: “I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” He will also follow customs not required by the Constitution, but begun by George Washington and followed by succeeding Presidents.

New York City was the capital of the young United States when George Washington was inaugurated as the country’s first President. Federal Hall on Wall Street was already crammed with congressmen and foreign ambassadors when Washington arrived for the ceremony on April 30, 1789. However, as Washington prepared to take the oath, it suddenly was discovered that a Bible was not present, and it was impossible to take the oath without a Bible! New York State Chancellor Robert Livingston remembered that the Masonic Lodge just down the street had a beautiful bible, and it was quickly brought so the ceremony could begin.

The bible was placed on a red velvet cushion and opened at random to Genesis 49-50 (Americans later considered it Providential that the bible opened to Genesis 49-50, chapters in which Jacob reassured his sons of their promise to a new land.). Washington placed his hand on the opened bible and recited the Presidential oath, adding the words, “I swear, so help me God!” He then bent down and kissed the open Bible. When he added the words and kissed the Bible, Washington was following a practice used not only in royal coronations but in British and colonial courts of the day. Later Presidents have continued to follow the precedent Washington established.

Many Presidents have chosen to use their own personal or family bibles for the oath taking, often opening the bible to a



George Washington inaugurated as the first President of the United States at Federal Hall, New York, April 30, 1789.

particular passage of Scripture meaningful to them, and since the Civil War a record has been kept of their choices. U.S. Grant, whose father’s name was Jesse, chose Isaiah 11:1-3, a Messianic passage which begins, “And there shall come forth a rod of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots...”. Though Rutherford B. Hayes was an effective President, his election in 1876 was particularly tumultuous. The night of the election, Hayes went to bed thinking he had lost, but there were contested elections in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida (who would have thought?). The uncertainty went on for months. Congress finally established an Electoral Commission to decide the

dispute. Hayes won the final electoral count by one vote: 185 to 184. Hayes chose Psalm 118:11-13 for his inauguration: “They compassed me about, yea they compassed me about: but in the Name of the Lord, I will destroy them...Thou hast thrust sore at me that I might fall: but the Lord helped me.”

Both William McKinley and William Howard Taft used passages from Solomon’s prayer before his coronation, found in II Chron. 1:10 and I Kings 3:9-11: “Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people. For who can judge this thy people, that is so great?” In his first inauguration, Woodrow Wilson, the son of a Presbyterian minister, chose Psalm 119. For his second inauguration, with World War I raging, Wilson chose Psalm 46. “God is our refuge and strength: a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed: and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea...Be still and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Franklin Roosevelt opened the bible to I Corinthians 13 for all four of his inaugurations. Harry S. Truman, who had read

through the Bible cover to cover twice by the time he was twelve, was the first to take the Presidential oath on two bibles at the same time. At his 1949 inauguration he had his personal bible and a facsimile of the Gutenberg bible, which had been given to him by the people of Missouri in memory of his mother. The Gutenberg bible was opened to the 10 commandments in Exodus 20; his personal bible on top was opened to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5.

Dwight Eisenhower used the bible he had at West Point for his two inaugurations. At the first inauguration he also used the Washington bible. The verses Eisenhower chose were Psalm 127:1 ("Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it..."), II Chronicles 7:14, and Psalm 33:12 ("Blessed is the nation, whose God is the Lord: and the people, whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance."). Richard Nixon chose Isaiah 2:4 for both of his inaugurations. Gerald Ford chose his favorite verses of Proverbs 3:5-6. Jimmy Carter wanted his presidency to be marked by humility and chose Micah 6:8. Ronald Reagan used his mother's well-worn bible for both his inaugurations, opening it to II Chronicles 7:14, which Reagan's mother had underlined and written in the nearby margin, "this verse is good for the healing of a nation." George H.W. Bush used the Washington bible opened to Matthew 5. In both of his inaugurations Bill Clinton used the bible his grandmother had given him. At his first inauguration it was opened to Galatians 6:8, "he that sows to his flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption: but he that sows to the spirit, shall of the spirit reap everlasting life." At his first inaugural, George W. Bush used an unopened family bible.

Lyndon Johnson's two Presidential oath takings were unusual in several ways. The photograph of the first, immediately after John F. Kennedy's assassination, was flashed around the globe as a testimony that the transition of government in that time of crisis was smooth and orderly. Besides being the first swearing in aboard an airplane, it was also the first time the presidential oath was administered by a woman. Someone handed Judge Sarah



Ronald Reagan's second inauguration as President, 1985.

Hughes a small bible belonging to Kennedy, and Johnson placed his hand on it while taking the oath. As it turned out, however, the book was a Catholic missal, not a bible. In Johnson's 1965 inauguration, Mrs. Johnson held the bible as her husband took the oath. This was the first time that the wife held the inaugural bible for her husband.

Throughout the history of the United States, the Bible has been an important symbol of the nation's leaders' reverence for and trust in God, who provided a higher standard than man alone. While some Presidents used the bible simply out of tradition, others found in the words of Scripture strength, wisdom, and solace as they held one of the most awesome positions in the world.

The Bible and Oaths

Bibles have been used in oath taking since the time of Augustine in the 5th century. European and British coronation oaths were regularly taken on a Bible. Though the Americans did not intend to establish a monarchy, George Washington recognized that oath-taking was a religious act and that the solemnity of the Presidential oath required a Bible. Placing one's hand on the Bible was a way of symbolically recognizing a higher standard than oneself bearing witness to the integrity of one's words. For this reason, until recently, many legal authorities held that the testimony of an atheist could not be trusted and was invalid because he did not recognize a higher authority. Renowned Harvard legal scholar Simon Greenleaf (1783-1853) wrote in his *Treatise on the Law of Evidences* that one class of people incompetent to testify as witnesses were those "who are insensible to the obligations of an oath, from defect of religious sentiment and belief. The very nature of an oath, it being a religious and most solemn appeal to God, as the Judge of all men, presupposes that the witness believes in the existence of an omniscient Supreme Being, who is 'the rewarder of truth and avenger of falsehood'; and that, by such a formal appeal, the conscience of the witness is affected. Without this belief, the person cannot be subject to that sanction, which the law deems an indispensable test of truth...Atheists, therefore, and all infidels, that is, those who profess no religion that can bind their consciences to speak truth, are rejected as incompetent to testify as witnesses."



"Why may not the Bible, and especially the New Testament, without note or comment, be read and taught as a divine revelation in the [school] – its general precepts expounded, its evidences explained and its glorious principles of morality inculcated?..."

Where can the purest principles of morality be learned so clearly or so perfectly as from the New Testament?"

U.S. Supreme Court, 1844 in *Vidal v. Girard's Executors*, court's opinion written by Justice Joseph Story



Washington's Inaugural Bible

The Bible Washington used at his inauguration was printed in London in 1767 and given to St. John's Lodge in lower Manhattan in 1770 by Jonathan Hampton, then the grand master. It is bound in maroon Moroccan leather with silver clasps and would have been quite an expensive commodity in its day. Other Presidents who chose to take the Presidential oath using this Bible were Warren Harding in 1921, Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, and George H.W. Bush in 1989. George W. Bush was going to use the Bible in 2001, but because of rain he did not. The Bible was also used at Washington's funeral in December 1799, the dedication of the Washington Monument in 1885, the re-laying of the U.S. Capitol's cornerstone in 1959, and the christening of the *USS George Washington* aircraft carrier in 1992. This important symbol of our Christian faith and heritage is on display at Federal Hall in New York City, opened to Genesis 49-50 as it was the day of Washington's inauguration.

Go Texan!

With the rodeo coming to Houston and Texas Independence Day being March 2, once again it's time to "Go Texan!" Perhaps at this time we can also think about the bible's role in the settlement of the state. The bible was often the only book many families possessed, and reading the bible or hearing the bible read aloud was often a daily activity for many families. What they read in their bibles shaped their outlook on life. In his book *Lone Star*, noted historian T.R. Fehrenbach described the bible's influence on these early Texans:

"The historical role of the English Bible in this Texas has increasingly been overlooked. But the King James Version afforded this stultified civilization on the fringes of the 19th century Western world with a great part of the basic culture it required. It gave the frontier farmer ... a basic folklore, philosophy and literature. It was, in fact, almost the only literature most families possessed.

"The Old Testament fitted easily into the 19th century Texas world. Its revelations of the human condition were held, even by the nonreligious, to be entirely valid and timelessly true. The young Texan read of evil that was ancient and ever-present, requiring eternal discipline of man; he learned of false prophets and lying sycophants, of licentious Jezebels and foolish kings, of mighty warriors and wise men. He absorbed an unflattering impression of such intellectual tribes as Scribes and Pharisees. And although few could articulate it or explain it, Texans gained



a timeless portrait of man's world, of the rise and fall of people, of bondage and deliverance, of God's patience and wrath, and man's enduring inhumanity to man. Visitors were often surprised to find Texans, who had no apparent civilization, able to strip vanities and euphoric philosophies from better-educated men. As a cultural, folkloric instrument, the Holy Bible played its part, in a way no official history or intellectually fabricated philosophy ever could."

The Bible in America Museum contains two bibles associated with the early Texas settlers. One belonged to James McDougle, who came to Texas with his family as a boy in the 1830's. The McDougles were among the earliest settlers of northwest Harris County. Another bible in the **Museum's** collection belonged to Nathan Richardson Wilson, who as a young man in his early 20s came to Houston from Baltimore in 1842 with his father Peter Wilson. Another Texas item in the collection is an elaborate Family Bible printed in Galveston in 1892. This bible includes an enormous amount of supplementary study material covering Bible and Christian history, theology, apologetics, as well as the geography, flora and fauna of the Holy Land. The **Museum's** collection also includes a large folio bible that was used on the battleship *Texas*. This bible is a later edition of **John Brown's Self-Interpreting Bible**, first published in the United States in 1792. The first edition of this bible is also part of the **Museum's** collection.



"Bible Reading" by K. Rittmann, c. 1954

Are You Regularly Reading Your Bible?

In resisting Satan's temptations in the wilderness, Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." If every word from the mouth of God is to be our spiritual food, then we certainly should be reading every word. One of the easiest ways to do that is to follow a Bible reading plan. There are many available. Some simply read straight through from Genesis to Revelation. Others provide for an Old Testament reading in the morning and a New Testament reading in the evening. In some plans, the reader will read through the New Testament twice and the Old Testament once in a year. Other plans arrange the Bible readings chronologically, according to when the events occurred. This plan intersperses the psalms, for example, with the historical accounts of David's life. Yet another plan arranges the Bible readings in the historical order in which the books were written. Several Bible reading plans can be found at www.backtothebible.org/devotions/journey. Look them over, choose one that's best for you, and begin reading "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Daily reading of the Bible was part of the routine of life for many early Americans. It transformed their lives, and it can transform yours. Why not start today?



Houston Baptist University
7502 Fondren Road
Houston, TX 77074-3298

281-649-3287

Fax: 281-649-3474

E-mail: dseverance@hbu.edu

visit our Website at www.hbu.edu/bia

“A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIBLE IS
WORTH MORE THAN A COLLEGE EDUCATION.”

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Please notify us of any changes or corrections in your address. If you would like to receive the *Bible in America Museum* Newsletter by e-mail and save the University postage, send your e-mail address to dseverance@hbu.edu.



A perfect outing for families, Bible Study classes, school groups, and senior citizens

There is no charge for admission

- Hours are: Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.
Thursdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.
1st Saturday of every month, noon-5 p.m.
- Appointments for tours at other times may be made by contacting **Dr. Diana Severance at 281-649-3287 or dseverance@hbu.edu**.
- Tours for groups up to 45 are available.
- School groups, home schoolers, and catechism classes (grades 7 and above are welcomed). A curriculum is available.

The Museum is located in the Moody Library on the campus of Houston Baptist University

Making Our List and Checking it Twice

We hope you have enjoyed receiving *The Bible in America Museum Newsletter*. It has been our goal to share with readers something of our rich Biblical Heritage, focus on important items in the Museum's collection, and keep you informed of happenings at the Museum. However, the newsletter is a major expense for us, and we want to be good stewards of our funds. We are checking our mailing list and removing those who no longer wish to receive the newsletter. If you wish to continue receiving *The Bible in America Museum Newsletter*, it is important that you phone (281-649-3287), email (dseverance@hbu.edu) or write (7502 Fondren Rd., Houston, TX 77074-3298) and let us know of your continued interest. You may also choose to receive the newsletter in an email format. We look forward to hearing from you.

New Film on Bible in America Museum

Ron Stone narrates the new media introduction to **The Bible in America Museum** which premiered at the **Museum's** Open House November 1. The script was written by Jerry Wiles, former Assistant Vice President for Church Relations at HBU; and production was done by Clay Porter, director of HBU's TV Studio. The film provides a brief history of the Bible and its importance, focusing on rare bibles in the **Museum's** collection. It will be shown regularly to visitors at the **Museum**.

