



John Brown's Self-Interpreting Bible

John Brown's Self-Interpreting Bible was one of the most long-lived of the early American annotated bibles. Brown, who lived from 1722-1787, was the orphaned son of a weaver in Abernathy, Scotland. He taught himself Latin and Greek while keeping sheep and later taught himself Hebrew. In fact, for a period of time, one minister spread the suspicion of witchcraft against Brown for his learning these languages when he had little formal schooling. Brown studied for the ministry, came to Haddington in 1751 and remained there until his death 36 years later. In his numerous writings, he sought to be practical and helpful to people who wanted to know the Scripture, but had not the time or skill for deep, personal investigations for themselves.¹

Brown's Self-Interpreting Bible was first published in 1778 in Edinburgh. In his own inimitable way, David Daniell commented on the title of this bible:

In some modern Testaments and Bibles the commentaries, annotation, even translation (many of them paraphrase) are often directed in slant. They will be bought, the publishers hope, for personal, even solipsistic, reasons. There are Bibles and testaments for the various stages of marriage and break-up, for the first year of divorce, for older women,

¹ "Memoir of John Brown," *New Self-Interpreting Bible Library*. 1914, 14; A.T. Robertson. *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 1923, 103-108; "John brown of Haddington," *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, 277.

for those suffering business failure, for those in therapy, for everyone looking for a quick fix of Personal Truth. Niche marketing must surely be a slippery slope.

It was not like that as the American nation was formed, when ‘Self-Interpreting’ meant interpretation for oneself, not interpretation of oneself.²

The first American printing of Brown’s Bible was a folio edition published in New York in 1792, with George Washington listed at the head of the subscriber’s list. This subscription edition was published in 40 numbers in a period of 2 years.

Brown’s Self-Interpreting Bible went through at least 26 American editions, with the New Testament being last published in the 1920’s. Later editions included expansions and additions by later Biblical scholars. A history could be written on the illustrations included in this bible over the years, and one can’t help but wonder what John Brown would have thought about their inclusion. The frontispiece of the first American edition pictured Columbia as a lady with an Indian headdress. In her left hand she holds the Constitution; with her right hand she receives the Bible from Peace, kneeling before her. The names of American patriots were written on a liberty tree behind her.³ In this way, America became part of the biblical world. The 1806 edition had 24 plates, several of which were quite brutal. One showed Joab stabbing Abner, with little cherubs above acting out the murder, above a tragic mask. Another showed the assassination of Benhadad by Hazael. The 1822 New York folio had for its frontispiece a very licentious picture of Davis spying on Bathsheba. As Dr. Daniell wondered, “How can that disreputable incident with its shabby consequences be thought for a moment to

² *Bible in English*, 601.

³ *The Self Interpreting Bible*, Containing, The Sacred of the Old and New Testaments. By the late Reverend John Brown, Minister of Gospel at Haddington. New York: Hodge and Campbell, 1792. All quotes of the *Self-Interpreting Bible* are taken from this edition.

represent the content of God’s saving Word?”⁴ Another picture in this issue had an illustration of an incident not even in the Bible – of Peter and a sorcerer struck by blindness. An 1836 printing had a much more appropriate frontispiece, showing Moses pointing to Christ carrying the cross with Deuteronomy 18:15, “unto him ye shall listen.” The illustrations of the 1896 and last edition, which continued to be published until 1908, no longer included such questionable illustrations, but rather included “over four hundred Photographs Showing the Places of the Bible events as they appear today.”⁵

Brown’s bible included explanatory notes placed at the bottom of the page with the scriptural text above. These notes, focusing primarily on translation issues, grammar or historical background, were primarily to make the text more understandable. The notes for each section were followed by “reflections,” which applied the Scripture to the heart. Throughout his work Brown emphasized that the goal of Scripture was to promote holiness and virtue and to glorify God. Dates and Scripture cross-references were placed in the margin. Brown himself believed these Scriptural references were the most important part of his bible. In his introduction he wrote:

as every Protestant must allow the scripture itself to be its own best interpreter...the uncommon collection of Parallel Scriptures, such as is not to be found anywhere else that I know of, has formed the most laborious, and will, to the diligent peruser, be found by far the most valuable, part of the work...this itself is a harmony of Scripture, a Concordance and a large commentary more certain than any dictates of man...I can truly say, that my labor, in collecting the parallel texts in this work, has afforded me much more Pleasant Insight into the oracles of God than all the numerous commentaries which I ever perused.

Brown firmly believed that Scripture was the best interpreter of Scripture:

The inexpressible advantage which attends it will infinitely more than compensate the toil. Herein the serious inquirer has the Spirit of God for

⁴ *The Bible in English*, 602.

⁵ *English Bible in America*, 320, 9, 283-284, 290; *Bible in English*, 600-603.

his director, the lovely oracles of God for his commentary. He has the pleasure of discovering the truth for himself in God's own light. And the discovery which he thus makes, by humbly searching the Scriptures, is inexpressibly more agreeable than merely to have met with it at random in some commentator. Being acquired by care and labour, it generally fixes itself much more firmly in the mind, And, while we are thus occupied in comparing the several texts, we may humbly expect that the Holy Ghost will illuminate all with his glory, and apply all to the heart.

John Brown's Introduction, consisting of 27 folio pages, discussed in some depth the divine authority of Scripture, the rules for understanding Scripture, and the relationship of Christianity to the Jewish laws. In addition, he gave an overview of the geography and history of nations, including a history of the church from its earliest days, through the middle ages and Reformation. He assured his readers that the Turks and the anti-Christ, the chief opponents of Christianity, will finally be extirpated and the millennium be ushered in, either in 1866 or 2016. He thus outlined a sweeping view of history which included his own day and beyond.

In his treatment of the divine authority of Scripture, Brown simply presented the history of the Scriptures and the evidences for their truthfulness, using arguments similar to arguments we have seen in earlier supplementary material. Brown also carefully elaborated on how the reader should read and understand Scripture. Reading the Bible was not simply an intellectual exercise but a spiritual one. The reader should begin with prayer that the Holy Spirit would apply the Scripture to his heart. The Scriptures should be searched earnestly with self-denial to know the power of God in them: "A deep sense of our ignorance, and of our absolute need of Scripture influence, must animate us to the earnest study of knowledge. He, who thinks that of himself he knows divine things to any purpose Knoweth nothing as he ought to know – only with the lowly is wisdom." Practice and application should be the end of any bible study. It is the keeping of

commandments, not simply the reading of them, that is important. Readers should proceed from the simplest to the more difficult, from the historical Old Testament to the more doctrinal New Testament. Each Scripture must be understood within the scope of the book within which it lies, whether it is history, poetry, or prophecy. Each Scripture must also be understood within the general plan of the revealed truth; an overview of the main outlines of histories, doctrines, and prophecies was important. Brown encouraged the reader not just to consider the abstract meaning of a text, but how the spirit of God intended it in a particular connection. For example, the glory of redeeming grace can best be understood in connection with abounding sin; man's wickedness is acting against God. How words were joined together would help the reader understand these connections; notice words like "and," "then," "therefore," "because," "in," "to," and "through." Finally, Christ Jesus was the end and subject of all Scripture, and the reader should look for Him there.

An 1874 American revision of Brown's Bible, with many additional notes, is quite interesting. It includes the revision completed by Revs. Cooke and Porter, two Irish Presbyterians, as well as several Americans, including C.P. Krauth, an Evangelical Lutheran; Rev. C.M. Butler, an Episcopalian and chaplain of the U.S. Senate; and Rev. Alfred Nevin, a Presbyterian. As were the bibles of Ostervald, Doddridge, and Scott, this was a bible not marked by denominational peculiarities, but acceptable to the broader Protestant evangelical faith dominant in 19th century American.

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