The Eyes of the Blind Shall See: The Braille Bible

By Rebecca Rizotti

In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. -Isaiah 29:18

On a table in the Dunham Bible Museum sits a book, open to public eye, empty of ink but filled with raised dots. To an uninformed passerby, it may appear a mere curiosity, yet there is a story of incredible suffering, perseverance, and patience behind that book—not only of one, but of many. This book of dots represents the suffering and perseverance of two people in particular: Louis Braille and Helen Keller. It is also a testament to the power of God's Word to transform and illuminate lives in the midst of great difficulty.

This book would not exist without the ingenuity and endurance of Louis Braille (1809-1852) of Coupvray, France. At three years old, he stabbed himself in the eye with one of his father's harness-making tools, and within months, an infection spread to the other eye, leaving him completely blind. In 1815, the young priest Jacques Palluy asked to tutor the bright boy, for, "although thin and pale, Louis was lively and enthusiastic," a storyteller with "endless questions" (O'Connor 17). His parents agreed, but after about four years it was clear to both Palluy and the village schoolteacher that Louis "needed a special school—a school designed to help blind people learn" (21).

While attending the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, Louis encountered sonography—a system of writing for the blind that utilized dots and dashes, like a Morse code for the blind. Louis could see great potential in this system, but it needed improvement: "As he

became more familiar with it, he began to find problems…a syllable containing several sounds might need nineteen or twenty dots and dashes. A word could have as many as a hundred" (36). Louis decided to fix this. He tinkered with sonography until he had his own system that "used fewer dots and dashes, making it easier to learn, and his combinations were small enough to fit under a single fingertip, making them quicker to read" (38).

At first, the inventor of the original sonography system rejected Louis's alterations, claiming that a thirteen-year-old boy could not offer any improvement to his system. However, the other blind students at the school enthusiastically accepted it. His headmaster, Dr. Pignier, agreed, and petitioned the French government that Louis's dot alphabet method "be recognized as the official system of writing for the blind" (42-3). The government at first politely refused. At age nineteen, Louis became an assistant teacher at the Royal Institute for Blind Youth, where he taught for most of the rest of his life, until, after struggling with chronic ill health, he succumbed to a respiratory illness (likely tuberculosis) in January, 1852. His last words were, "I am convinced that my mission is finished on earth" (57).

Through his steadfast determination and brilliant creativity, Louis Braille's legacy included a life-changing gift for the blind all over the world. In 1854, after Louis's school had requested it for several years, the French government finally endorsed Louis's dot alphabet; and in 1878, "representatives from most of the European countries met at the World Congress for the Blind. Together they voted to make braille the standard system of reading and writing for the blind throughout the world" (57). In the United States, Braille was first introduced in 1860 at a blind school in Missouri and became the official system in 1917. Today, studies have shown how Braille literacy has drastically improved the employment rates, education levels, financial self-sufficiency, and reading habits of hundreds of blind persons (Ryles).

Almost sixty years after the Braille alphabet was first developed, Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing at nineteen months to an illness now believed to be scarlet fever (Keller, *Help*, 4). She understood most of what happened around her, with the exception of speech, which "vexed [Helen]" so much that she "screamed until [she] was exhausted" (Keller, *Story*, 27-28). When Helen was six years old, she experienced what she later described as "the most important day I remember in all my life" (34)—the day Anne Sullivan came to her. Under Sullivan's tutelage, Helen began learning to read when she was seven. She had raised-letter words which she could put together, and "quickly learned that each printed word stood for an object, an act, or a quality" (42). Helen's world of darkness was illuminated by the kindness and perseverance of her teacher.

As Helen learned to read, she began to study other subjects informally with Sullivan; in 1900, sixteen-year-old Helen entered a college preparatory school with Sullivan as her mentor. Like Louis Braille, she decided, "If my eyes will not tell me about men and events, ideas and doctrines, I must find another way" (O'Connor, 32). She loved books and learning, and said, "Literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourse of my book-friends" (Keller, *Story*, 100).

Through her determination and experience, Helen grew to appreciate "…the precious science of patience, which teaches us that we should take our education…leisurely, our minds hospitably open to impressions of every sort. Such knowledge floods the soul unseen with a soundless tidal wave of deepening thought…" (90). Helen "knew that there would be obstacles to conquer; but they only whetted [her] desire to try [her] strength by the standards of normal students" (Keller, *Midstream*, 7). She graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.

Helen used a raised-letter Bible for many years before one in Braille became available to her. The first Braille Bible was published in 1924 by Robert Atkinson, through the Braille Institute of America (founded in 1919). In 1931, the American Bible Society gave Helen a copy of their first Braille version of the Bible. She "then gave them her 1908 raised-letter Bible," which she had used for over twenty years ("Bible Ministry"; "Past Exhibits"; "Historical Figures"). Similar to the copy Miss Keller received, the Braille Bible owned by HBU was published by the Braille Bible Foundation. While the large size prohibits an entire Bible being published in one volume, the holdings of the Dunham Museum include I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Epistles of John. A notice inside the Bible says that "any Braille reader living anywhere in the world may request a free copy of the Bible in Braille or parts thereof" by writing to the address printed below (Severance).

Louis Braille and Helen Keller surmounted great difficulties for the benefit of others, persevering in times of great trial. The Braille Bible, which Louis made possible and Helen found comfort in, gives new meaning to the verse, "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, *not an iota, not a dot,* will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18, emphasis added). This verse, which attests to the trustworthiness of Scripture, can also remind us of the power of God's Word to sustain us through the unpredictable challenges of life. Though most of us do not suffer from loss of physical sight, we all suffer trials in various ways, and the stories of Louis Braille and Helen Keller are an encouragement to not give up, to trust God for our strength, and to allow Him to build character in us and have "the eyes of our hearts enlightened" (Ephesians 1:18).

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