You Can Judge a (Good) Book by its Cover

In a year with no new major translations of the Bible, the focus is on repackaging and on reaching teens. For proof that the Bible continues to pulse through American culture, witness the attention stirred up by two films based on the New Testament, The Gospel According to John—recently reviewed in the New York Times and elsewhere—and Mel Gibson’s The Passion. The first is attracting large audiences in cities outside the usual hubs of new movie release, New York and Los Angeles, while the second continues to generate controversy and high emotion long before its release.

But the gospel according to publishers of the Christian Bible and the Jewish Bible stirs a bit less passion as three well-established trends continue to hold sway. First, youth Bibles are hot, as publishers continue to seek new ways to engage teens and tweens. Second, paraphrases and novelizations continue to sell strongly. And perhaps most indicative of the real health of the Bible market, publishers report that new packaging of one of the oldest books has led to some surprising sales.

Repackaging offers even more Bible choices, and booksellers say customers are often baffled. Paul Caminiti, Zondervan’s v-p and associate Bible publisher, believes half of all people who shop for a Bible leave empty-handed. “We don't have to do any research on this because the voice is so loud and it is everywhere,” he said. "Booksellers are saying 'slow down.'" Paul Franklyn, director of Bibles, reference and e-publishing for Abingdon Press, described advice given to the house as it prepared to launch its first proprietary Bible. “Penetration into the market is very deep,” he said. “Anyone jumping in right now has to be very aware, because Bibles are segmented into so many different versions, personalities and age levels that it is difficult to make one stand out among the rest.” And many publishers say what stands out most right now are Bibles with covers that are anything but traditional. “The black and burgundy leather Bible became a staple, and everybody thought that's what a Bible looks like,” said Laurie Whaley, Thomas Nelson's brand manager for the New Century Version (NCV). “But I think there's been this evolution that it doesn't have to look like my grandma's Bible.”

A New Look

Zondervan offers a prime illustration of this trend. When the house launched its line of eight Italian duo-tone leather-covered Bibles, the initial print run of 75,000 was exhausted in three weeks. "These have been huge," said Mark Rice, director of communications. "Right out of the gate, our sales increased 300% from our initial projections." Only the covers are new—inside is the familiar and popular New International Version (NIV). First up were the NIV Compact Thinline and NIV Compact Reference Bible, both published in July. The NIV Study Bible, The Student Bible, The Teen Study Bible, The Men’s Devotional Bible and The Women’s Devotional Bible came out this month, marking the 30th anniversary of the NIV. The success of these new-look Bibles has Zondervan execs searching for explanations. "We've heard for years, the medium is the message," said Rice. "Many people perceive a black leather Bible as archaic, but we are focused on what is engaging and innovative, and we believe that begins with the cover.” Zondervan also has The Life in the Spirit Bible (2003)—formerly the Full Life Study Bible (1990)—in both the NIV and KJV, with a new cover and articles, and The NIV Student Bible (Sept. 2003), edited by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, now in large print. Zondervan has indefinitely delayed the publication of a New Testament in its controversial Today’s New International Version (TNIV), originally planned for last June. Rice said the delay has “nothing whatsoever to do with the controversy” stirred by this gender-neutral translation, and that the full TNIV Bible is still slated for 2005 release.

There are also new products at Zondervan, including The Discovery Bible and The Prayer Devotional Bible (both Mar. 2004) for the evangelical market. For Catholics, there is The GNT Student Bible with Deuterocanonicals, also edited by Yancey and Stafford (2003) in the Good News Translation. This is Zondervan’s third foray into the Catholic market. "We are testing the market by publishing three kinds of Bibles for Catholics," Caminiti said, including the new GNT, simple text Bibles (without study aids, etc.) and a women’s devotional Bible. "The jury is still out as to which is going to work best," he said. Zondervan now exhibits at and attends Catholic book shows and scholarly meetings to get the feel of the market. "These become listening posts for us," said Caminiti. "The information we get has been challenging. We have discovered that Catholics are as diverse as evangelicals.”

Reaching Teens & Tweens

Much of the recent focus at Zondervan and other houses has been on the teen market, where many Bible publishers report big numbers. New from Zondervan is True Images: The Bible for Teen Girls and Revolution: The Bible for Teen Guys, both in the NIV translation (Nov.). Taking MTV as an inspiration, Zondervan identifies and deals with issues important to each gender: body image and beauty for the girls; aggression and competitiveness for the boys. Zondervan has partnered with a music company on a CD to be sold separately but marketed together, and commissioned a bracelet for girls and key chain for boys with charms tied to the Bibles’ themes. Zondervan also has The Edge Devotional Bible for “tweens,” ages 8 to 12, in the NIV (2003) and The NIV Backpack Bible and The NIrV Backpack Bible, both coming out in November with Italian duo-tone covers.
No one is more firmly planted in that world now than Thomas Nelson, where all the buzz is about Revolve: The Complete New Testament (2003), the New Century Version “Bibleizine” for teenage girls. The first run of 40,000 evaporated in eight weeks, and a second printing of 120,000 hit stores at the end of September. Whaley expects there to be another run before Christmas (Nelson’s average Bible sells 40,000 copies in a year). Nelson “was not afraid to take a risk,” Whaley said. “We didn’t just publish another Bible in black leather format.” Nelson hired an independent publicity firm to promote Revolve, and it paid off — the “fashion magazine” Bible has been featured on NBC’s Today Show and in the New York Times Sunday Magazine. Nelson plans a boy’s version for spring 2004.

NavPress has had enormous success repackaging its The Message contemporary-language Bible-as-novel by Eugene Peterson. First published in 1993, this retelling has sold more than 8.5 million copies in versions ranging from single books of the gospels to the New Testament and the entire Bible. Now Sarah Snelling, NavPress’s new associate publisher for The Message Division, reports that The Message Remix (2003)—designed to appeal to younger readers but differing from the original in its smaller format and the addition of verse numbers—has sold over 150,000 copies in its first month. NavPress will offer “collector’s editions” of The Message Remix four times a year in different formats. Out this month is The Message Remix: Snack Mix Limited Edition, a lunchbox with the book inside. Due in January is The Message Remix: Limited Edition #2/Trail Mix, which comes with a backpack. Other repackages include the just-published The Message: Slimline Edition and The Message: The Gospel of John. Snelling reports that sales for The Message show no signs of slowing—Wal-Mart ordered 15,000 copies in May and Sam’s Club had sold more than 60,000 by late September. Snelling said key to keeping the product fresh is partnering with Christian celebrities and their pet causes. NavPress plans to promote The Message by sponsoring a tour with Christian singers TobyMac and Kirk Franklin to benefit at-risk youth. That helps fulfill NavPress’s publishing mission. “We don’t want people to just read the Bible, but to live it,” she said. “That’s the big push for us this fall, and that will be our marketing campaign in the spring.”

Mixing Old and New

Tyndale House has a mix of new Bible products and older, repackaged ones. Said Joan Begitschke, director of Bible marketing, that is really the name of the Bible publishing game. “I don’t see repackaging as a trend,” she said. “That’s the way you sell Bibles. You go into your backlist and refresh products.” Tyndale, proprietor of the New Living Translation (NLT), has reached back to 1996 for The One Year Bible, NLT to create The One Year Bible Slimline Premium Edition, NLT. In new products, Tyndale has The Prayer Bible, with articles on different prayers traditions; The NLT Complete Reference Edition Bible; and The Notemaker’s Bible (all Oct. 2003), which features wide margins for scribblers. In youth Bibles, Tyndale had great success with last year’s The Metal Bible, NLT, which came in two different sleek metal covers and will follow up this April with The Metal Bible, NLT: One Way and The Metal Bible, NLT: Identify. The first pair have sold 100,000 units in their first year. Begitschke said Tyndale would like to see the 13%-15% market share its NLT holds in Bible sales be reflected in the shelf space dedicated to its Bibles in both CBA and ABA stores. “We are working on getting that message out because there is a misperception that our market share is a lot lower than it really is,” she said.

Oxford University Press’s sacred texts are also a bit of the old and the new. When OUP went back to the drawing board to update its much loved but long out-of-print The Pilgrim Bible, it found the old format and packaging no longer met consumers’ needs. “People joke about it, but USA Today has really affected how we expect to see information packaged,” said Rob Stone, OUP’s manager of advertising and promotion for Bibles. So last month’s The New Pilgrim Bible, KJV still features a basic approach to Christian theology in its notes and study aids, but the format of the pages is crisper, brighter and features more pullouts—what USA Today readers know as “sidebars.”

Said Stone, “We haven’t changed the theological perspective in the original notes, but we wanted to rearrange some of the original material so that it would be more readable to a 21st-century audience.” This product will be targeted to an evangelical Christian market—many of them the children and grandchildren of the young Christian missionaries who made the original version so popular. For the same market, OUP just released The Evangelical Parallel New Testament, which features eight translations—four to a page—ranging from the two-decade-old New Century Version (NCV) to the Today’s New International Version (TNIV), released earlier this year.

Crossway Books marks the second anniversary of its English Standard Version (ESV) with a couple of new products, including the entire Bible on CD and on cassette tape, both due out this month, and a compact thinline edition that came out in September. To help promote the entire ESV line, Crossway will distribute a pamphlet titled “Why I Switched to the ESV,” which is signed by well-known Christian pastors and seminary presidents. Marvin Padgett, v-p of editorial, said interest in the ESV is “very strong,” especially in the pew Bible format, which in some months outsells all other versions. Padgett, a former bookseller, said the translation’s popularity highlights a consumer need for a “mature” translation. “We think there is a real need and desire for a Bible that faithfully reproduces the text,” he said, even at the cost of sometimes sending the reader to a reference book or two. “If it [the text] is difficult, we leave it difficult. This is not to throw stones at any other publisher, but the Bible is not a commodity in our view, it is the word of God and we need to know what the word of God said.”

In new adult Bibles, Nelson this year offers The Answer Bible in the NCV, The Everyday Study Bible and My Time With God, a New Testament with daily devotional readings, all in the NCV. Repackages include The Devotional Bible (2003) in the NCV and edited by Max Lucado (a revision of his Inspirational Study Bible), The NCV Compact Bible (Oct.) and The Holy Bible, NCV, which comes in camel-colored leather— “the same leather Coach uses for its bags,” Whaley said. In the New King James Version (NKJV), popular with many evangelicals, Pentecostal Christians and some African-American congregations, Nelson just released a new Women of Faith Devotional Bible and The MacArthur Study Bible.

At Abingdon Press, the focus isn’t so much on repackaging as it is on building the reputation of an existing product. Out this year is The New Interpreter’s Study Bible in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) with Apocrypha; it rests on the scholarly foundation of The New Interpreter’s Bible (1994), in 12 volumes with commentary. Abingdon’s Paul Franklyn said the house is marketing the study Bible heavily to seminaries, colleges and
Broadman & Holman also is building on existing product. The full translation of the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) will be available in April 2004 in The HCSB Gift and Award Bible, The HCSB Pew Bible, The HCSB Drill Bible and The HCSB Red Letter Text Bible. Before then, B&H will make the full translation—three years in the making—available free online to create consumer buzz. In addition, B&H will do some bookseller education, plans for which are still in development. But, said B&H Bible marketing manager Stephanie Huffman, bookseller education is a marketing focus. "If the customer walks in and the retailer doesn't know what he or she is talking about, you are dead," she noted. B&H is still going after the niche Bible market, a segment it does not consider moribund. "We are not afraid to meet the needs of smaller markets," Huffman said. "The beauty of being a smaller house is that you can craft a smaller product and meet the smaller need, and we are committed to that."

Huffman is excited about B&H's four Holman Military New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs in the HCSB, one for each branch of the armed services, with specific prayers and hymns and remarks from officers. Since July publication, these four have sold through more than half of their 120,000 initial print run.

Jumping into the Bible market for the first time is Destiny Image with The Great Book: The New Testament in Plain English (Oct.). Don Nori Jr., marketing and sales director, reports that when Wal-Mart learned of the product, "they were not interested," he said. But once shown the flashy cover design, "they were excited... because it wasn't traditional leather." The house will follow with The Seamless Bible (Apr. 2004), a novelistic retelling of the New Testament in chronological order and in the King James Version (KJV). Nori said The Seamless Bible fit the quest for a "non-traditional Bible approach". We were looking for the mass appeal Bible, one that is different and will appeal to a new generation of readers. "In other Christian sacred texts, Covenant Communications has The Book of Mormon: Family Heritage Edition (Sept.), with 70 illustrations from 23 artists. Robby Nichols, Covenant's v-p of marketing, said the book will be available in LDS stores and in chains across Utah and Idaho.

And Torah, Too

It isn't only the Christian market that seems to be repackage-happy. The Jewish Publication Society has enjoyed steady sales of its Hebrew-English Tanakh since its publication in 1999. But Ellen Frankel, editor-in-chief, reports that the newest version, The Pocket Edition of the Hebrew-English Tanakh (Aug.), weighing in at a bricklike 6-by-4-by-2 inches, "is flying." In its first month, sales reached 4,500 copies. Frankel and JPS are bullish enough on Torah sales that they are beginning to discuss plans for a revised translation. "We assume that every generation needs its own translation," she said. "The one we have now took 30 years to complete and if we start talking about it now, by the time we get another finished product, it could be another 30 years."

Oxford University Press offers The Jewish Study Bible (Jan. 2004). Much of the book's format is modeled on the house's The Catholic Study Bible (1990). "Now we are coming out with the same concept, but oriented for the Jewish market," Stone said. The house has obtained the license for JPS's popular Tanakh translation in English. In marketing, Stone said, although new Christian Bible products "will follow well-trodden paths," with distribution in seasonal catalogues that reach a primarily evangelical Christian market, The Jewish Bible is "a horse of a different color. It seems we are finding new areas we need to present it to with each passing week. "To reach those constituencies, OUP has set up a Web site and is conducting direct marketing to rabbis, rabbinical schools and congregations in all the various branches of Judaism. It is also positioning The Jewish Bible as a major academic title and marketing it to Christian and Catholic colleges, seminaries and universities. OUP will also target a tiny splinter of the religious market by reaching out to Messianic Jews through Christian marketing channels.

At ArtScroll/Mesorah publications, work on The Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud in English is nearing completion, with Menachos Vol. III (May 2003), Chullin Vol. IV (Aug. 2003) and Berachos Vol. I (Oct. 2003) bringing it to 63 of 73 final volumes. The project should be completed in 17 months, and general editor Rabbi Nosson Scherman said sales have been very good as the market for Jewish sacred texts picks up momentum. He said that gatherings to celebrate the completion of the communal cycling through of the Talmud—an event that occurs about every seven-and-a-half years—are getting bigger. "More people are becoming interested in this kind of study," Rabbi Scherman said. "Its availability in English has made it possible for more people to participate."

He is also encouraged that the Talmud is finding a home beyond Jewish bookstores, making it into some of the chains and onto Amazon. Rabbi Scherman also reports Ingram has ordered copies for distribution to the Christian market, where interest in Jewish sacred texts is growing.

Stanford University Press is taking a step outside its usual market with The Zohar: The Pritzker Edition, translated by Daniel Matt (Nov.), a new translation of the 13th-century work of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah). This is the Zohar's first English translation from the original Aramaic and its first appearance with a side-by-side commentary. "I am trying to recover the original flavor of the texts," said Matt, who worked with antique scrolls written by scores of scribes. "It is a challenge and a daring enterprise to make it available to a wider public," he said. With a history in Jewish studies, Stanford plans to market The Zohar to Jewish bookstores, universities and rabbinical schools and also to the general trade. "We want to reach beyond the academic market, and this is our chance," said Geoffrey Burn, director of SUP. That, Burn continues, makes for "a pretty enormous marketing challenge." SUP will send Matt on a lecture tour to New York and Chicago, to speak to Jewish clergy and educators and to promote the book in print, radio and other media outlets; the press also plans to sponsor panels at scholarly conferences.

"Sales peaked right after 9/11, when booksellers throughout the industry saw a spike," he told PW. "Our increase was in line with that. Sales did return to more typical levels some months later, but they have continued to do well since." Publishers say they
see no waning of bright new covers and updated texts. "However, " warned Nelson's Whaley, "I do not think the longevity of a Bible publisher is in repackaging. I think we do need to keep re-engaging our culture with new product." Zondervan's Caminiti said Bible publishers should look to the next generation. "They are not at all engaged in the Bible, and it would be presumptuous on our part to think they will automatically get engaged when they are older. So we have to try things that are innovative to intrigue that younger buyer." Nori, taking Destiny Image into the Bible market for the first time, is optimistic. "The book market and the Bible market have been down, but there are still stars," he said. "How many times can you give someone a leather Bible as a gift? Today, it has to be something different." Fewer Qur'ans, but More for Buddhists?

While sales of the Qur'an spiked two years ago, reader interest seems to have waned. Laleh Bakhtiar, marketing director for Kazi Publications, a publisher and a Qur'an distributor, said returns have been very high. "After 9/11, a lot of Qur'ans were ordered, but then three months later, we got back at least 25% of what we sent out," she said. Still, she said, demand is steady at colleges and universities. The story at Tahrike Tarsile Qu'ran, a publisher and distributor, is a little different. President Aunali Khalfan has a unique marketing strategy—he travels to major book shows and gives away his products, perhaps as many as 3,000 Qur'ans to date. "Then people order them," he said. But the trick is getting them to re-order before their shelves are bare. "Sometimes the books are finished in the bookstores, and that is a setback," he said. Khalfan, too, said interest in all Islamic titles peaked after 9/11—a phenomenon he sees repeated with every newspaper headline about Islam. "There is much, much more interest and the demand is getting greater," he said. "People want to know about Islam and they are going to the Qur'an for their answers." Out earlier this year from Tahrike Tarsile is The Glorious Qur'an: A Simplified Translation for Young People (June) and The Holy Qur'an: Arabic with English Translation and Commentary (May).

Meanwhile, some see the market for Buddhist sacred texts picking up speed. Jeff Cox, publisher of Snow Lion Books, credits this to the number of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism having finally reached critical mass. "There are now about 500 Tibetan Buddhist centers in North America," Cox said. "It has taken a while for people who attend those centers to get their feet wet and take the next step into deeper study of the classic Tibetan texts. In this line, Snow Lion has The Treasury of Knowledge Book One: Myriad Worlds and The Treasury of Knowledge Book Five: Buddhist Ethics (June 2003) which will reach 10 volumes by 2006. Also new is Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chod (May 2003), the work of a 12th-century woman now revered as a Buddha. Next year will see The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment: The Lamrim Chenmo, Vol. 2, to complete the three-volume work that debuted in 2000. Cox said the momentum in Buddhist sacred texts is toward deeper philosophical works. "In Buddhism, it is not the faith that liberates you, but the teaching of the Buddha," he said. "So there is a lot of study and practice." Snow Lion sales figures bear him out, with The Great Treatise, Vol. 1, reaching 5,000 copies. As a result, Snow Lion has upped some initial print runs. Still, Cox said, there is a lot of bookseller education to be done. "What I see is the chains focusing on frontlist books and large numbers of Dalai Lama books by major publishers," he said. "They need to pay more attention to the Buddhist backlist." In other Eastern religions, North Point Press, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, has The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic by Ramesh Menon (May 2003). This work marks North Point's return to publishing Eastern religious texts. But Becky Saletan, North Point's editorial director, said the current market is very different from the last time North Point published in this field in the mid-1990s. "There has been a huge explosion of popular books in Buddhism, and we did not want to compete there," she said. "So we did our research on The Ramayana, and it showed that there is a steady interest in it, especially in the academic market. That's where North Point will focus its promotion, and it will follow the hardcover edition with a paperback (May 2004) aimed at course assignments. In addition, North Point has done some promotion with the South Asian Journalists Association and will place advertisements in South Asian media in several cities. So far, the press is pleased with the results. "The book has done nicely within our modest expectations," Saletan said.

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