

## AMERICA'S PUBLIC BIBLE

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**KYLE ROBERTS:** Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Kyle Roberts, and I'm the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives.

Welcome to today's virtual discussion, with Dr. Lincoln Mullen, to celebrate the release of his wonderful new digital publication, *America's Public Bible*.

To begin with, I want to acknowledge the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusetts people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those of you joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the library's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, civic, and cultural dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, as well as our Digital Archive, which has more than 100,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students and scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story.

All right, well, that's enough about the Congregational Library. Let's get to the reason we're all here today, and that's to hear from Lincoln Mullen, who is Associate Professor in the Department of History and Art History at George Mason University, as well as the Director of Computational History at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

Now, Lincoln is a historian of American religion, and his digital historical work has also taken him into U.S. legal history and the history of early American elections. At George Mason, he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on digital history, as well as courses on American religion and the history of Christianity.

And I know, Lincoln, you are no stranger to the Congregational Library from your earlier works, and I promise I will put you on the spot in Q&A to tell us some of your favorite stories about researching at the library.

But for now, let me get off the screen and hand it over to Lincoln.

**LINCOLN MULLEN:** Good afternoon, everyone. It's really a pleasure to be with you today. And I really appreciate the kind invitation from the Congregational Library and from Kyle to speak with you all today. And in particular, I'm looking forward to the Q&A time.

Perhaps one of the best features of this particular book talk is that since this is a website, you all get the book for free. So if you go to the website [americaspublicbible.org](http://americaspublicbible.org), you should be able to find the project there, and hopefully it'll be accessible to you all, and you'll be able to take a look at it.

And as Kyle mentioned in his kind introduction, I had the good fortune to be able to go to the Congregational Library a lot when I was in graduate school.

And I will tell my one favorite story about the Congregational Library, which is I was sitting at the research table and an archivist bumped into me with a cart. And we were both sort of chatting to diffuse the situation and asked, what do you have there?

And the archivist replied, oh, about 80 uncatalogued conversion relations. And I said, may I please take a look at those? And they became the basis of chapter one of my first book.

So I'm really grateful for that chance encounter at the Congregational Library.

Let me begin by talking about *America's Public Bible*.

For most of its issues in 1902, the *Ellensburg Dawn* featured a quotation from Benjamin Franklin prominently on its front page: "a Bible and a newspaper in every house," the masthead proclaimed, "are the principal support of virtue, morality, and civil liberty."

That quotation from Franklin was doubtless spurious. But in the 19th century United States, you couldn't find two kinds of publication more ubiquitous than the Bible or the newspaper.

The number of newspapers grew over time, reaching an all-time peak in 1909.

The ubiquity of the Bible was likewise a historical development. It took an enormous amount of effort to make the Bible a ubiquitous text. It took the invention of the stereotype press, which used cast iron... cast plates to avoid the problem of having to laboriously reset type for each new print run to make mass producing of Bibles affordable.

And it took a massive effort to fund the distribution of Bibles. In the lead, of course, was the American Bible Society.

Four times over the course of the 19th century, the American Bible Society tried to print and distribute a Bible for every single family in America. They came short of that goal, of course, but such a massive, repeated effort got a lot of Bibles on a lot of shelves. And presumably, some of those Bibles were even read.

Bibles and newspapers thus followed a similar chronological pattern of development. And they also gained a similar importance in the 19th century. We know that both became an important influence on American public life.

We can ask then, does the presence of the Bible in the newspaper give us a way to understand the Bible in American public life? It isn't hard to find examples of the Bible in newspapers.

Any time I read through a 19th century newspaper, I'm likely to find at least one quotation from a Bible.

Let's look at just one.

This first one was published in the Owingsville Kentucky *Outlook* in 1899. Titled "Reading Between the Lines," it is a retelling of the parable of the Good Samaritan to fit the political circumstances of its day. The revised parable goes something like this:

"A certain man was taking a journey and fell among thieves.

So have the people.

And they stripped him and wounded him and left him half dead.

So have the plutocrats.

And there came a certain priest that way, and when he saw him, he passed on the other side.

Such is Republicanism," by which he means the Republican Party.

"And likewise, a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him and passed by on the other side. Such is Democracy," by which he means the Democratic Party.

Finally, the Good Samaritan comes up and binds the man's wound, and we are left with the parenthetical comment: "Such is Populism."

What's going on here?

A very familiar text from the gospels has been repurposed to a political end. This use of the Bible is not theological, but it does use the Bible's moral authority to lend weight to a political position.

From this one example, we might raise a host of other questions.

Was the Bible used to comment on other political questions? What about other topics such as culture and society? Was this same text used in the same way... same way by different people? Or did they have other interpretations or other uses? Were some biblical texts more popular than others? Just how common was all of this?

The problem here is one of scale.

If Bibles and newspapers were ubiquitous, at least in the 19th century, then there are more examples of biblical quotations than we can possibly find. And when we do find them, how do we know if their use is typical or extraordinary?

Thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress, one place we can go looking for the Bible in public life is in *Chronicling America*.

*Chronicling America* is an amazing collection of some 20 million newspaper pages covering more than a century and a half of American history. Because it is publicly funded, it is not... it is free not just to read, but also to use in pretty much any other way that you can imagine.

So, what I set out to do was to write a computer program which finds biblical quotations or allusions in *Chronicling America*.

What you see in front of you is a page from *Chronicling America*. This is from a South Carolina newspaper in 1852.

The program measures certain things about phrases from the Bible. Are those phrases on the page? Are they particularly unusual phrases? So, for example, the phrase, "went into the city," appears a lot in the Bible, but as you can imagine, it appears in other contexts in 19th century newspapers.

But if I were to say the phrase to you, "through a glass darkly," that can only be a quotation to the New Testament.

Are the matching phrases close to one another on the page, or are they scattered?

A machine learning model then sorts through all the potential matches to find ones what are likely to be genuine.

So you can see here on this page. This is a sermon that was preached in St. Paul's Cathedral. And we can see quotations. There's actually a number of different quotations of it. Here's a quotation from the book of Acts.

What kind of quotations does this program turn up?

All kinds of things. I think this is maybe one of the most fun projects that I have worked on, simply because the algorithm has turned up all kinds of crazy quotations that I would never have thought to look for on my own.

Let me show you two serious examples before I show you some more of the fun stuff.

This 1852 South Carolina newspaper reprints a sermon preached at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The sermon was preached against the idea that divided the human race into separate and distinct parentages.

In other words, this is a sermon against the idea of polygenesis, the prevailing scientific idea in the 19th century that different races had different origin points or different acts of creation.

Against this idea, it marshaled Paul's text from the book of Acts that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men."

This same text was quoted in an advertisement from the New York *Tribune* in 1863. This paper claimed to be Republican, both in the generic and in the partisan meaning of the term, because of its hearty adhesion to the great truth that "God has made of one blood all nations of men."

To be Republican was to hold, in biblical terms, that Black people and white people shared the same origins.

Keep in mind that this position was a matter of scientific debate. Throughout the 1860s, European scientists and philosophers such as Voltaire, George Cuvier, and David Hume, as well as American scientists, such as Charles Pickering and Louis Agassiz, held that different races had different points of origin and so were very nearly different species.

Yet here, a prominent abolitionist newspaper advertises itself in biblical and indeed theological terms.

We might note that the same Bible verse from Acts, which contains the phrase that "God has made of one blood all nations of men," was used against slavery and against the idea of polygenesis.

But it also contains the phrase, “and hath determined the bounds of their habitation,” which was used in the 19th century to argue that African-Americans should be returned to Africa, and in the 20th century to justify segregation and Jim Crow.

In other words, the Bible is not a straightforward, plainly interpretable text with a single meaning.

Plenty of protestant Christians in the 19th-century United States thought that it was. But the wildly diverse ways that they used the text undercut that claim.

As many historians, especially Mark Noll, have realized, if you can understand the varied uses to which people put the Bible, you can learn a great deal about American religion, politics, and society.

So let me show you a few examples of the kinds of things that *America's Public Bible* has turned up.

Here is a 19th century joke. Not all 19th century jokes are funny, but I think this one stands the test of time.

“It is said that up in the moonshine district in eastern Tennessee, a popular minister has this inscription posted on his door: ‘Jug not lest ye be Jugged.’”

So we can see that the algorithm is turning up, not just quotations, but also allusions.

And the joke is funny here because it takes the form of the biblical phrase, “judge not lest ye be judged.”

Here's another somewhat surprising one. At the end of the period of reconstruction following the American Civil War, there was a disputed election between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel J. Tilden. Hayes being the Republican and Tilden the Democrat.

Immediately after the election, it was believed that Tilden had won the election, and then eventually it was thrown to Congress, and there was a compromise in order to make Rutherford B. Hayes the president.

Now, I was surprised when I found a number of quotations to the Bible: “the Lord called Samuel, the Lord called Samuel.”

You can see examples here down to the right from a Democratic newspaper, but with not much context. I must not be a very good 19th-century historian because I eventually got the joke once I found this one: “he said that the Lord called Samuel, but not Rutherford—and that seems to be so.”

In across... emblazoned across the top of many different Democratic newspapers, was this quotation to the verse: "the Lord called Samuel." We can see a, kind of a sacralization, if you would, of the of the campaign by Samuel J. Tilden.

Sometimes I like to joke that the algorithm works better when the headlines quote the Bible because the text is bigger.

This is an example of a, of a page from the *Rock Island Argus*. The *Rock Island Argus* ran a number of pages like this, not just on this one topic. Here we see in sort of imposing letters: "Be sure your sin will find you out." And beneath it is a list of quotations from the Bible. These are quotations about separation from God, about being sinners, about being in hell, and so forth.

What I think is interesting about the way that the newspaper uses this particular set of quotations is that there's no commentary. There's no explanation of any of these texts, and there's no... nothing to connect them apart from these, these headlines that explain what they're supposed to be used.

So in other words, I think we can understand that the person who put this together assumed that the texts that they were publishing were straightforward and interpretable, and that when people read the biblical text, they would come to the same conclusions that they themselves had.

Here's another one. This text is entitled "An Original Sermon by the Son of God." It goes on to republish the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount, taking up almost the entirety of a newspaper page. My best guess here is that the newspaper editor had run out of copy for that particular day. I think it was a holiday. And so he needed a little bit of filler. But I really like the title here.

Less amusing, however, is the fact that this this reprint of the Sermon on the Mount appeared in a newspaper titled *The Daily Caucasian*, which was a white supremacist newspaper published in the American South during the period of Jim Crow.

Here is another example. This one is drawn from an obituary that was published during the Great War or World War I. "Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friend."

And this particular verse from the Gospel of John grew in popularity throughout the beginning of the 20th century, in large part because it was used to commemorate the dead of the Great War.

Newspapers were an important way of forming community. You may be familiar with correspondence courses or other things along those lines. But newspapers sometimes ran newspaper Bible clubs.

So here you can see a column called Everybody's Bible Box, and you could send in your questions to the column, and a sort of a community formed around these discussions of the Bible that were kind of like a Bible study that might be held in a church or in a community, but were instead held in the pages of print.

This particular question here is, "why did the Apostle Paul forbid women to teach in the church? Was he a woman hater?" And I've written about this particular text from Ephesians 5 as one of the essays that appears on the *America's Public Bible* website.

Not every use of the Bible was serious as you can already tell. Here are a couple of examples about the law or the Ten Commandments.

So the quotation on the left offers a parody of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt have no other place to buy dry goods than at the store of Hillbronner & Company, Water Street, Tionesta, Pennsylvania." And it goes on and on. I don't think it's particularly amusing in all the details, but you can tell that it's using the form of the Bible rather than the actual content of the Bible in order to make its point.

Another example over here is the summary of the law that Jesus gave: "Thou shalt worship the almighty dollar with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and all thy might. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor less than his money."

Obviously, this is intended to be a critique of greed. But again, the point is made not by using the content of the Bible so much as by using its form.

And below it, just as an aside, you can see that there is an advertisement for the smallest Bible ever published, in just an inch or so in each dimension. Probably ignoring the biblical guidance to write the text so that he who runs may read, if you, if you catch the allusion.

So this is the kind of thing that we can turn up from, from *America's Public Bible*. Just millions and millions of examples of quotations, not all of them as interesting as these, but lots of examples.

So in a certain sense, we're worse off now than we were before.

Before we knew that there were lots and lots of quotations to the Bible in newspapers. Now we found them all, and we're drowning in the quotations, and we have to try to be able to make sense of them.

What can we do?

One thing that we could do is to create trends for the rates of quotation. In other words, we can figure out whether the rate of quotations was going up or going down. When did it peak, and how did those peaks correspond with certain events or actions in American history?

So we're gonna to try just now a little bit of interactivity. I'm gonna ask you all to do this on the honor system. What I'd like you to do is either on a piece of paper, scratch paper, or in your head.

Here are the axis lines for a chart. And I'd ask you to try to draw a chart of the trends in biblical quotations over the 19th century.

The x axis is gonna start at 1835, so roughly in the period of the Second Great Awakening. And it's gonna end in 1920, so in the aftermath of the Great War.

Okay, take about 15 seconds here. And I want you to sketch out in your mind's eye or on paper which direction you think the trend is going to go.

[approximately 15 seconds of silence]

Okay. I hope you had a chance to think about what that might look like.

Here is what I found, adding up all of the millions of quotations to the Bible in the *Chronicling America* over this period of roughly a century.

Now, I didn't show you that blank chart to trick you. To be honest, I couldn't have filled it out correctly myself until I did this research.

If I were going to guess, perhaps some of you guessed the same way that I did, I would have guessed that the trend line was mostly down, but the actual trend line is rather different.

The reason I showed you this is because it's easy to persuade yourself that you understand what the trend is once you've seen the trend. And you can tell yourself a just so story and assume you can already explain what's going on.

So trying to surprise yourself a little bit, I think is helpful as a research technique.

The trend in quotations is practically the opposite of what I assumed it would be.

On the one hand, you can see that there's a pretty steep decline from the late 1830s and early 1840s. I don't think that's particularly important, although it is notable. There are many

fewer newspapers in *Chronicling America* for that period. So there's more uncertainty in the trend line.

But also, the 1830s and the 1840s were a period of especially high activism among evangelical Protestants. So it's not too surprising to see a higher rate of quotation in that period. I'll also mention that more of the newspapers in that period are explicitly religious, whereas more of the newspapers later on are general interest.

What is interesting, though, I think, is that the trend goes up after the 1860s. Not quite doubling, but close, from a trough in the mid 1860s to the peaks of the early 1890s and the mid 1910s.

So there's no easy narrative of a secularization of the press, whatever secularization might mean in this case.

Such general trends are suggestive.

Why is there a peak in the mid 1910s, for instance?

The answer almost certainly is that newspapers were publishing material about the Great War, like the one that I showed you. And memorials of the dead and calls for sacrifice lent themselves to biblical quotations.

I'll also mention, what are newspapers known for publishing?

They're known for publishing obituaries as well as advertisements. But we can learn far more about how the Bible was used by looking beyond the general trends at the histories of specific verses. We could start by asking just which questions were quoted the most.

So let's try one more sort of interactive thing.

What I'd like you to do is make a guess, if you could please, for some verse that you think might have been the most quoted in the 19th century. You can feel free to either put in a biblical reference, although I can't promise that I will know it off the top of my head. Or you can put in a phrase from that quotation.

Okay, one person guesses John 3:16. An excellent guess. The text, if I remember from Sunday School, is "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

It is a very popular verse. We'll test this one out here in just a moment.

Sermon on the Mount. Another excellent guess. We already saw some quotations from there. Certainly some of those verses are very popular.

Okay. Let's take a look at the most...

Oh, one more, the Beatitudes. Okay. That's the same guess as the Sermon on the Mount. Or rather, the Beatitudes are a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Certainly the most popular part.

Let's take a look to see what some of these texts are.

Here is a chart which shows you the top 24, excuse me, top 36 most popular verses from 1836 to 1922. And the trend line shows you the... whether they went up or down or the peaks and so forth.

So there are a lot of surprises here.

I'm going to try to flip over here to the live version at *America's Public Bible*. And if you'd like to follow along and explore this for yourself, if you go to the, to the preface and then scroll down, you'll see the interactive version here.

And the reason I'm gonna do that is I can't remember exactly what all of these verses are, so it'll be helpful to have the actual text.

So one of the first guesses was John 3:16, which doesn't even crack the top ten for the 19th century, which is a surprise because it is certainly the most quoted verse in the 21st century and maybe the late 20th century. And it grows in popularity over the course of the century, but it is not even a part of the top ten.

The most frequently quoted verse is Luke 2:14, which is, "glory to God in the highest and on Earth, peace, goodwill towards men."

And there's a reason that this is the most quoted verse, which is that newspapers liked to publish things around the holidays, and so they would often include sections quoting from the gospels or the birth accounts of Jesus every December. So it was a very frequently used text for that reason.

The next most quoted verse, Luke 18:16, is a bit of a surprise. You can see that it was more popular at the, at the beginning of the century and declined in popularity. But this verse is, Jesus said, "suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God."

Why was this verse so popular?

It was popular because it coincided with the rise of the Sunday School Movement at the beginning of the 19th century. And newspapers often republished Sunday School lessons.

In other words, if you were a Sunday School teacher, you could get a sort of a prepared Sunday School lesson from your newspaper, which would offer you guidance on what you could do. And oftentimes, those Sunday School lessons quoted this particular verse in kind of like a masthead or subhead beneath the heading.

There are other surprises here, too.

Matthew 25:21 is maybe not so much of a surprise: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," a verse which was very popular in obituaries.

But what about Exodus 20:15?

You can note here from the trend line, and you'll see that if you click through, you'll get a better visualization that's more detailed.

You can note that in a particular year, 1912 to 1913, the phrase "thou shalt not steal" became enormously popular.

Why might that be?

My first guess was because the income tax amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1913, but that's not it. It was a decent guess, but not accurate.

The reason is that after Theodore Roosevelt lost the Republican Party nomination to William Howard Taft, he accepted the nomination of the Progressive Party, otherwise called the Bull Moose Party.

Echoing the words of his 1906 speech, "The Man with the Muckrake," Roosevelt declared that his most important principle went back to Sinai: "Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not steal the nomination. Thou shalt neither steal in politics nor in business. Thou shalt not steal from the people, the birthright of the people to rule themselves." And the reason the verse became so popular is Roosevelt's speech was republished in dozens and dozens of newspapers.

So we can see here an example, not of sort of a long-term, general trend, but rather of a hyper-focused political event that drives the quotation.

If we go back, you can explore this for yourself. There are many more verses here than we'll have time to explore in our brief time here, but I encourage you to click through the site and you can go and see specific examples and figure out why each of these verses was used.

So let me bring you to the last point that I want to make before we turn to the to the Q&A time.

This brings us to the questions of interpretation. And one thing that I'd like to raise is why call this project a commentary?

You can see on your screen in front of you one of the best known and most voluminous commentaries of the 19th century, published by Albert Barnes. Again, this was originally connected to Sunday Schools. It was titled, "Notes Explanatory and Practical," and then he had them on most, if not all, of the books of the Bible. And you can see that at the top of the page over here is reprinted the text of the Bible. And then beneath it is all of his comments on it.

I have called this project a commentary for a reason. Like any commentary, the usefulness of this site is less in its overarching claims than in the details that it uncovers.

As with any commentary, readers will come to the site seeking to make their own interpretations. And it is quite likely that the reader will be more interested in the materials that the site provides than in the argument that it advances.

But the commentary's overarching argument is that the Bible is primarily a medium through which public discourse happened, rather than primarily a substantive source for that discourse.

Many American Protestants who thought of the Bible seriously as the source for all human endeavors walked a fine line between the clarity and the mystery of the Scriptures.

On the one hand, many Protestants believed wholeheartedly in the perspicacity of the Scriptures, a doctrine which meant that the meaning of the Scriptures was sufficiently plain that any believer could understand it on his own, even without the aid of a pastor or priest.

God had written the scripture so plain that, "he who runs may read," in the memorable phrase from the prophet Habakkuk.

But on the other hand, those same Protestants wrestled with the text, and they filled their bookshelves with commentaries, Sunday School lessons, and sermons in the hopes of better understanding the word of life. The scriptures were "full of the words of the wise and their dark sayings," as King Solomon had said.

When the Bible was quoted in newspapers, the way it was used mirrored that paradox of clarity and confusion. When the Bible was cited on one side or the other of an issue, only rarely was its meaning explicated rather than assumed.

Think back, if you would, please, to those list of quotations presented without any kind of comment. There's an assumption on the part of the person who prepared that list that everybody will read the text the same way that they did. It was far more common to treat the text as an authority to be cited, rather than as a text to be understood.

Those who cited the text most typically thought that the readers would understand its meaning precisely as they did. The multiple and mutually exclusive ways in which newspapers used the Bible put pay to that assumption.

If the Bible could be cited against slaveholding, then it could also be used to bolster a slave society.

The Bible spoke in favor of capitalism and markets, and also cried out for the plight of the worker.

The Bible condemned whiskey and demon rum, unless it didn't.

The Bible promoted peace and pacifism, and it also supported the nation in its wars against Mexico, Spain, and Germany.

The apostles and prophets were Republicans, unless they were Democrats.

In short, any given quotation from the Bible seemed the source of certainty, but in the aggregate, they sowed confusion.

The significance of the Bible in public discourse then, was less what it said or was made to say, but in the fact that people said what they had to say in the language of the Bible.

By looking at uses of the Bible in newspapers, we can see which parts of the Bible were in common currency among Americans, as well as the range of interpretations that were given to those verses.

Verses could be cited without a reference or used in jokes or proverbs, indicating a kind of literacy or familiarity and possibly a shared assumption about what those verses could be interpreted to mean.

Verses that were used constantly were a shared cultural touchstone. While verses that were used only episodically revealed the tensions in a particular political or social situation.

By looking at how the verses were actually used, we can see how the Bible was a contested, yet common text.

Like the markings or annotations that people made in their Bibles, the verses that they quoted tell us nothing about the Bible, but a lot about 19th century Americans. Or at least that's the conclusion I've come to anyway, after staring at tens of thousands of biblical quotations over the last several years.

You're more than welcome to come to these quotations, to use the website and come to your own conclusions.

And I hope that you will do exactly that.

Thank you.

**KYLE:** Well that was fantastic. Thank you so much, Lincoln.

So we have some good time here for question and answer. And I see questions are already starting to come in.

It's just absolutely fascinating, you know, sort of thinking about the conclusions that you're coming to, right?

When you have this massive data set, and you're trying to make sense of it, and that you're giving us a publication that is very different, right, than the ones we're normally used to using. This is not your authoritative take on this, but this is almost, you know, feels like your, kind of, guideposts to how to really mine and use this.

I'm curious, you know, if we're thinking about, if we were talking about this in a book club or if we're talking about this in a classroom, are there any quotations that come to mind that you, that you were just kind of struck? You're like, wow, this is used in so many different ways.

You know, to that point, really, I'm trying to show that it's about an authority to be cited as opposed to a definitive explication.

**LINCOLN:** Sure. that's a great question. Thank you, Kyle.

One of the essays that's on the site is about verses that were steadily quoted. In other words, verses that were used frequently over and over again.

One of those verses is I Thessalonians 5:21: "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good."

So on the one hand, you can have verses which are used episodically like, "thou shalt not steal." They just sort of appear for a moment and then they're gone. Or verses that are connected to the Civil War, or to the Great War, or so forth.

But why would a verse be used over and over again?

One reason is just because it's malleable. You can use it in so many different circumstances.

And so I think I Thessalonians 5:21 is an example of that.

It was often used in advertisements. You know, speaking to the usefulness of the wares. Let's see, I found it in advertisements for vegetable pills, for stomach bitters, for baking powder, for many other kinds of goods.

It was also used by farmers who said, you know, don't just use the sort of agricultural methods we were taught by our fathers, but let's try to pursue sort of scientific agriculture.

Basically, any time there was a disagreement, people would, you know, quote that verse, "prove all things."

One newspaper quoted it for southern rights. Another quoted it for the original meaning of the Constitution. It was the answer to a newspaper quiz. So, you know, it's just a totally malleable text.

And that's what I'm trying to get at with the bigger claim that I'm making here. People did rely on specific things that the Bible said, but even more they used the Bible as the medium of discourse. It was a way of talking through the Bible in order to communicate to others.

**KYLE:** Which I think, and you sort of touched on this towards the end. You know, the great question about what can this tell us about biblical literacy? How far do you want to push that readers fully comprehended what was going on there?

I mean, I guess there's part of me from a popular religion standpoint that would wonder, are people learning about the Bible through the newspaper in some ways by seeing the repetition of certain phrases?

**LINCOLN:** Sure. That's a, that's a great question, too. It's difficult.

One of the, one of the real problems or difficulties with this kind of research is that it's mostly disconnected from specific people. Lots of the newspaper articles are anonymous. And then as you're, as you're indicating, you don't know who read them.

There's a... this is from a different line of research, but there's this sort of great story, I think it was in the American Tract Society Colporteur Reports, about going to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey and trying to sell people biblical tracts.

And some people had never heard the word, heard the name Jesus before. In another house, they, you know, said that they already had a Bible. When they brought it out, it was the works of Shakespeare because the people were illiterate.

Now, probably the Colporteurs were for playing up those stories for effect. You know, it's hard to tell, but certainly the question of literacy can't be taken for granted.

What I do think is probably clear is that in most instances, the people who are creating the texts, because it's difficult to know about the people reading the text, but the people who are creating the texts assume literacy of their readers.

Whether that was a correct assumption or not, I don't know.

I do think that a lot of the jokes and so forth assume a kind of a familiarity. You'd have to, like, not just get the joke, but catch the allusion. And that's been kind of like a guiding light for trying to understand this.

The cultural historian Robert Darnton wrote a great essay about a joke, "The Great Cat Massacre," and he says, If you don't understand what the joke is, then you don't really understand the times, and the milieu, and so forth. So that's why I've been perhaps overly fixated on 19th-century jokes in these newspapers.

**KYLE:** I think they make for good presentations.

So. There's a great question here from Erin Fulton. So Erin asked, do you have any sense of how biblical quotations or allusions may compare in prevalence to other types of source text in this corpus?

Erin writes, you know. hymn lines and Shakespeare both come to the top of my head more quickly than an individual verse when thinking about what might be in a newspaper.

**LINCOLN:** That's a really fascinating question.

I've been very interested in trying to do some research on hymns and trying to understand the patterns of how hymn books borrow from another. Like which hymns are there, and how they change them? But I had not thought about it in this, in this context.

Shakespeare would certainly be possible to do, like, there's no... I mean, there's nothing special about the algorithm for the Bible. We could easily plug in lines of Shakespeare and get similar results.

I have not done that research, Erin. So I'm sorry. I don't know that I could comment on it specifically.

Maybe along those lines, I will say that I've tried to ask about other religious texts besides the Bible and tried to use different versions. So, for example, the *Book of Mormon*, which would be a really interesting text—scripture to the Latter Day Saints—and using a similar kind of vocabulary and structure.

The difficulty that I found was that there are just very few quotations to the *Book of Mormon*. Not enough to even create some of those trend lines that I've shown you. Partly the difficulty is that the *Book of Mormon* itself quotes from the Bible, and it's hard to distinguish between those. But the prevalence of quotation was very low.

So I don't know that I've done some quantitative research, but I think that, I think it is fair to say that the biblical quotations are probably at the top of the pile when it comes to frequency.

**KYLE:** Great.

Nice question here from Elizabeth Reilly. Maybe going, you know, you've had a long experience with this text, with this data set. Are you getting a sense of how much this material might be coming from sermons?

And I think there's probably an interesting question there about, did we expect sermons to be published in secular newspapers in the 19th century?

**LINCOLN:** Sure. Absolutely.

I don't know that I can give you a specific percentage, but certainly a large number of these quotations are coming from sermons.

You know, some of these sermons are public sermons.

So, for example, after the assassination of McKinley, there are a number of sermons, you know, by practically every denomination and every newspaper commemorating his death. And of course, they all sort of quote biblical texts.

The example that I showed you from the *Lancaster Ledger*, it's not exactly a public sermon in that sense. But it's a sermon that speaks to a public topic, the question of slavery and polygenesis. And that's the reason it shows up in the newspaper.

But then you can also find sermons where the local newspaper just needs to fill column inches, and so they had give a space over to the local Methodist minister or whoever it may be.

I wouldn't say that's the only way that verses get there frequently. Advertisements, obituaries, as I've already mentioned, these are huge ones. Like local religious columns and things like that, that also drive these quotations.

**KYLE:** I'm gonna jump to another question and then come back to the next one in the queue. And this is about correlating those popular quotes with events that are happening at certain times.

So you're talking about McKinley's assassination. You know, say you, say you're a student wanting to do research on, you know, what quotes were used during war, or during voting rights, or women's suffrage.

So, great question from Jean Alexander, one of the Board of Directors here.

**LINCOLN:** Great.

I, I'm going to, if I may, I'm gonna share my screen again, and hopefully give you a way to try to answer this.

So if you, if you go to the, to the site, there's a way that you can try to answer this question for yourself. And the only reason I'm saying answer for yourself is there's so many verses here I can't possibly have looked through all of them.

Right here on the front page you'll see the featured verses, just verses that I think are particularly, particularly interesting and that were frequently quoted.

But if you click instead to verses chronologically, this isn't perfect, but it's at least an attempt to organize the verses based on when their peak quotation was.

So for example, here you can see Job 3:17 peaks in 1836.

And if you just keep sort of scrolling down, you can see the shapes are different. Like a lot of them peak early on simply because the verses are most quoted then.

But if we scroll quite a ways down, you know, here's "give us this day our daily bread," which comes from the Sermon on the Mount, which somebody mentioned earlier. It peaks in 1879.

You know, here's another quotation. And so this Proverbial one, again, 1877.

So it's possible to look at the verses and try to find verses that were used at a particular time.

Another way to go about this, Jean mentions women's suffrage, for example. One of the essays on the site is about that verse from Ephesians 5 about women's authority, which was a debated topic around women's suffrage.

So you can take a verse that you suspect might have been used for that purpose, and you can go look at the individual quotations and try to divine what that particular meaning might be.

So absolutely. Verses were used all the time for debates about women's suffrage, both pro and con. It's one of those issues where the text of the Bible is marshaled on both sides of the public debate.

**KYLE:** What I think it's so fantastic here, right, is that in going... in doing that deep dive, right, say you look at, you know, 1863, you're then going into the scanned newspapers as well, and you can see all the other material that's around it, right?

So I can imagine that doing, you know, giving yourself a little bit of time to dig in, you're gonna start to spot the other quotes. And then you can work back out and see how they chart.

So that's really...

**LINCOLN:** And if any of you are teaching, you know, high school students, or college students, or whatever, and you want an easy lesson plan. Well, what you can do is just give them a verse and tell them to go dig through the quotations and tell you what it means.

Short history assignment.

**KYLE:** Question here, a technical question. Could you briefly describe the database underlying this project and comment how, and how you cleaned up the data?

I mean, did you clean up 14 million or 20 million words after your program trawled *Chronicling America*? Or how much you had to do?

And this comes from Erin, who's saying that she's a bibliographer for the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship's Sounding Spirit Research Lab. So is very sympathetic to doing data management on this scale.

**LINCOLN:** Sure. I'll try to answer the question very briefly, Erin. And then point you to some places where you can get a fuller example. And you know, for any of these questions, I'd be happy to correspond with people after the fact too, if I've not given a satisfactory answer.

The *Chronicling America* corpus is big. It's a lot bigger now than it was when I got started. I got started when there were 12 million newspaper pages. Now there's 20.

But the actual... despite that fact, it is not particularly large to deal with. If you're just dealing with the plain text, you could, you could easily fit the entirety of the corpus on a laptop.

Finding the quotations was computationally intensive, and I'm fortunate to be able to use the high performance computing cluster at George Mason University to do that faster.

But then the actual database is large, but it's not insurmountably large. You could you could easily fit it on a laptop.

The way it's stored right now is just in a PostgreSQL database. And then there's a, we use an API at RRCHNM to serve that data that runs the public visualizations. There's also a method, methodology essay on the website that explains more about this. And the code is free and open source.

**KYLE:** Great question here from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, a longtime friend of the Congregational Library.

And he says, thanks to this project and to recent books like Mark Noll's *America's Book*, which Charlie, you probably have gotten through. I think it's a little thick for me to make it through.

And for example, several others on Jonathan Edwards' use of scripture.

The Bible seems to be a hot academic topic, which I hope is the case, and I hope everybody will come to the Congregational Library and research. Sorry for that plug, that shameless plug.

Would you, Lincoln, agree that the ubiquity of the Bible as a common cultural text ironically led to the decay of its authority? Importantly or definitively, conflicting uses of the Bible in the Civil War spelled its doom as a culturally unifying text.

**LINCOLN:** Thank you very much for the question, Dr. Hambrick-Stowe, and yes, I have Mark Noll's most recent book right behind me there on the shelf. I can't promise I've read every word of it, but I read a great deal of it.

I think it's a great question.

And yes, I'm, I agree with Mark Noll's argument in the book, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, which is then in some of the other works as well, that the Civil War--to quote a much greater Lincoln than I--you know both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God. That spells the demise of the Bible... of the, of the Bible as an authority for political commentary.

What I think is maybe a little different about this site, is that it, I think it demonstrates the continuing cultural relevance of the Bible. Even if the idea of a Bible commonwealth, again, to use Professor Noll's words, even if the idea of a Bible commonwealth is not there.

In other words, when it comes to things like life events, births, deaths, marriages, when it comes to public tragedies, whether that's weather things—or, you know, earthquakes, tornadoes, things along those lines—when it comes to pestilence, plague, which we have had our own experience of. But of course, there were yellow fever epidemics and the like in the 19th and early 20th century. The Bible is the language that is used in those circumstances.

So I don't think this is a disagreement at all with Mark, who has been incredibly generous in supporting me while doing this research, but rather to say that the end of the Bible commonwealth and the end of the political relevance of the text, I don't think necessarily implies the end of the cultural relevance of the text.

**KYLE:** I think that segways really nicely to a question from an anonymous attendee, why are there so few, if any, biblical quotations or even allusions in public, in the public press today?

The attendee writes, I noticed this even in the Sunday comics on Easter Sunday. Only one strip even hinted at the real reason for Easter baskets and egg hunts.

**LINCOLN:** That's a great question.

I'm afraid I don't know the answer to that. I could certainly speculate. There is, I think there is a decline in biblical literacy for many reasons. And so the possibility of the Bible as a common text simply isn't there.

We can also point out that since, I mean, this has its roots in much longer periods in American history, but since the 1960s and changes in immigration laws, the United States has become a much more religiously diverse place. It was always religiously diverse, but has become even more so in the second half of the 20th century.

And as a result, the Bible is not a text for everybody. In other words, the Bible was a common text for certain groups of people, for American Christians, and maybe as well for American Jews, but is not for other Americans.

I'll say anecdotally, my teaching technique is to quote the Bible in a proverbial sort of way to my students and see whether they notice what I'm trying to say. And oftentimes they don't pick it up. Some do, but others don't.

There's a, there's some excellent research that came out of the Center for the Study of Religion in American Culture on the Bible in contemporary American life. And so I'd refer you

to that which has some great sociological and ethnographic studies of the Bible in present day United States.

**KYLE:** A fun question here from Issa Saliba, does the King James... King James Version reign supreme here?

You know, I think one of the things that I appreciate reading about was that you didn't just search for one Bible's, kind of interpretation or translation of a text. But in the end, is the King James Version, the 19th century speak, or do we have Dewey and other versions in there?

**LINCOLN:** Yes, that's a really interesting question.

So a lot of this comes down to timing, but also like the specific methodology of the translators.

You'll forgive me for not having the dates exactly at the tip of my tongue, but the first revisions to the King James Version by Protestants were undertaken in the 1880s, and that's the Revised Version, which then, after a few years later, becomes the American Standard Version. Much later on, there's the Revised Standard Version.

It gets confusing. There's Standard, Revised, American. They're all sort of jumbled together.

The... there's two points to be made here.

The first is that it's not until the 1880s that the first revisions that are authoritatively backed by the Church of England and then by sort of councils of Protestant churches are created.

And then the second point is that the way that those revisions are created by American Protestants is by revising the King James.

In other words, they don't retranslate on the basis of a new methodology or a new theory of translation. But rather, they take the existing text of the King James Version, and they change words here and words there. With the result being that it's very difficult to distinguish between the different versions from a, kind of a computational thing, when you need to have this kind of fuzzy matching.

So I don't think that I found too much evidence that there was a large uptake in those texts in the newspapers.

It wouldn't be until you get to the 1950s or 60s, I believe, that you would get texts where the translation is just radically different from the translation of the King James Version.

I'll mention, I did try, and I really regret that I was unable to use the Isaac Leeser version of the Bible or the Jewish Publication Society version of the, of the Hebrew Bible.

And again, the reason was that the wording was so similar, I couldn't, I couldn't honestly and accurately distinguish between the two.

On this question, though, I'd refer you to Peter Thuesen's really amazing book. It's titled *In Discordance with the Scriptures*, which is a history of biblical translation.

**KYLE:** Well we are at the end of our hour.

Thank you, Lincoln, so much for being with us today.

And everybody out there, I hope you will not only check out *America's Public Bible*, but also join us on May 10th to learn about *A Constitutional Culture: New England and the Struggle Against Arbitrary Rule in the Restoration Empire*.

Thank you.

**LINCOLN:** Thank you all, very much.