

If the Bible were being compiled for the first time right now, what would we put in it? Making the case for a NEW New Revised Standard Version

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The Next Testament

The facts of the case are familiar to almost everyone. A few months

ago, as winter was setting in, Judge Roy Moore, the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, was removed from office for his refusal to heed a federal court order. U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson had instructed Moore to clear the state judicial building's rotunda of a 2.6-ton granite monument to the Ten Commandments, arguing that the monument violated the constitutional principle of separation of Church and State. The monument had been placed in the rotunda by Moore in 2001, and he had ignored all entreaties to get rid of it.

The saga of "Roy's Rock" followed a predictable pattern. Liberal and secular groups railed against the intrusion of an overtly religious symbol into the highest state court in Alabama. Moore's supporters argued that the Ten Commandments broadly represent "the moral foundation of law." As the controversy raged, atheists asked to have a monument of their own placed in the court's rotunda: a statue of an atom. Judge Moore turned them down (though there would have been more than enough room for a life-size rendition).

Well, the battle is over now. What remains, as always, is the double life the Bible leads. On the one hand, it is obviously a religious document—for believers, either literally or "in some sense" (as a squirrely Anglican might have it) the very word of God. On the other hand, it is a foundational text of our culture, an artifact that has shaped even secular aspects of Western civilization.

What pretty much everyone agrees on is that whatever its nature, the Bible is a collection of many bits of writing, representing many kinds of literature, and that its various pieces came into existence at different moments over more than a millennium. As the Ten Commandments case sputtered on, I began to indulge a fantasy. Suppose a committee were formed and given this charge: select a collection of texts in English, written over a period of centuries, that somehow fulfills the same functions as the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—the Next Testament, it could be called. What would be in such a collection? To be clear: the charge would be not to compile some new "canon"—some kind of Great Books course—but, rather, to assemble the raw materials for something that would have the same cultural feel a few thousand years hence that the Bible has now.

Start with, say, the Book of Genesis—the classic creation story.

Scholars explain that the book as we know it is probably an intertwining of work from three main ancient sources—one author designated J (the

"Jahwist" or "Yahwist" source, because this writer refers to God as *YHWH*), the second designated E (because this writer refers to God as *Elohim*), and the third designated P (the priestly source). The creation story in our new, modern Bible might be woven from sources known as W, H, and D. W would refer to the physicist Steven Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes*, an account of the Big Bang. H would refer to Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. W and H have plenty of the requisite awe, menace, and wonder, and although both eschew theology, they have things to say about meaning. (From W: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.")

The oldest of the sources for the new Genesis, D, would be Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. D is by far the most humane of the three writers—warm, observant, a superb anecdotalist, similar in some respects to the old Bible's J. And he would provide knotty issues for future scholars to argue over. For instance, which version of *Origin's* last sentence should be accepted as orthodox? Should it be the first edition's "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been Originally breathed into a few forms or into one ..."? Or the second edition's version, in which after the word "breathed" D inserted the words "by the Creator"?

The biblical books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are largely collections of laws, rituals, and recommended practices—the ingredients of a coherent social order. The Next Testament version could be fashioned from several sources—*Jane Brody's Good Food Book* and *The Joy of Sex*, perhaps, but also the Internal Revenue Service's Form 1040 information booklet, *The Rules*, the U.S. Army's *Ranger Handbook*, the columns of Ann Landers, and the Mayflower Compact.

One-for-one analogues of biblical books come to mind for some portions of the Next Testament. In the curious book that bears his name, Jonah is engulfed in a mysterious experience and emerges transformed. Would *Through the Looking-Glass* or *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* fit the bill? The erotically charged poetry of the Song of Songs—said to be the book most frequently copied in medieval monasteries—finds an equivalent in the Sonnets of William Shakespeare. A possible replacement candidate for the entire Book of Psalms would be the poems of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson is more taut and reserved than the psalmodist, to put it mildly, but many of the same themes (loss, solace, searching engagement with the divine) are there.

The Book of Proverbs is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, though it is really an amalgam of sayings ("Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler") by many sages. In the Next Testament one could capture something of its spirit with Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*. ("Search others for their virtues, thyself for thy vices.") But to cater to our own era's contradictory taste for the bitterly cynical and the vapidly inspirational, one probably ought to stir in at least a few apothegms from Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* and Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*.

As for the books of the (real) prophets, the Next Testament could have a Book of Martin (for the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.), a Book of Primo (for Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*), and a Book of Edmund (for Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which glimpsed the dangers of utopian faith). There could be a Book of Rachel (for Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*), and a Book of Aldous (for Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*).

The Book of Job is a category unto itself: a huge swath of contemporary literature implicitly evokes Job—be it the Job who accepted his fate as the Lord cast woe upon him or, more strikingly, the Job who angrily challenged the Lord and His justice. The problem here is not a dearth of analogues but a torrent of them: the works of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Koestler, Wiesel.

Job, of course, is a book of the Hebrew Bible, notwithstanding the jaunty affirmation by Howard Dean, as he sought to show off his scriptural savvy in advance of the southern primaries, that it was his favorite book of the New Testament. As for the actual New Testament books, finding analogues would take some thinking.

Only one seems straightforward. The mystifying and disturbing tropes of the Christian biblical book called Revelation (or sometimes Apocalypse) took shape in a context of real-world horror and persecution. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, composed after the carnage of World War I, and incomprehensibly lyrical in the same way that Revelation often is, could take its place in the Next Testament. But what about the Gospels? My own thoughts initially turn to literature touching on Lincoln and the Civil War, America's central saga of shame and hope. And what of the Epistles of Paul? Should we look to Orwell?

Obviously, much remains to be done. Creating Next Testament analogues for the "historical" books of the Bible would be tricky; and then

there's the whole issue of the Apocrypha—those texts associated with Scripture that have lesser status, such as Tobit, Susanna, and Judith. (There would be plenty to work with here, light and dark: think of stories like O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery.") Also remaining to be figured out is what the Ten Commandments should consist of in the Next Testament—not a trivial issue, given that a majority of Americans today would probably align with only about five of the original ones. Fortunately, there's no need to settle everything at once. It took centuries for the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to congeal into their present form. The proposed Next Testament, unlike Roy's Rock, is not yet carved in stone.

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