

THE FIRST PRINTED GREAT LIGHT

Masonic Service Association - Short Talk
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Sometime between 1450 and 1455, the Gutenberg Bible-the first complete Bible to be printed-was given to the world. No other book has had so great an influence on the Craft. The heart of all Masonic lodges is the Great Light in Masonry-the Holy Bible.

In every recognized lodge the world over, it lies open upon the Altar whenever a lodge is open. In this country it is usually open at the 133rd Psalm in the Entered Apprentice Degree, the 7th chapter of Amos in the Fellowcraft Degree, and the 12th chapter of Ecclesiastes in the Master Mason Degree.

The Holy Bible is the rule and guide of Masonic faith and practice. The degrees of Masonry are based upon the building of King Solomon's Temple and upon Biblical history. Quotations from the Book of Books occur throughout the ritual. Characters from the Bible are a part of Masonic degrees. Without the Bible there would be no Freemasonry as we know it.

For nearly two hundred years the Great Light has been the center of the lodge. From it has emanated that light by which Masons see the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Its teachings are the Masonic teachings. The spirit of Masonry, in which all men stand upon an exact equality and are valued for their internal, not their external qualifications, comes from these sacred pages.

Books, newspapers, magazines and Bibles are so easy to obtain that they are taken for granted. More copies of the Bible have been printed in more languages in more countries than any other book. In every hotel bedroom will be found the Bible, placed therein by the Society of Gideons. No man without a Bible but can obtain one, free if he has no money, from Bible Societies and churches. In practically every home in the civilized world is a Bible in which is recorded the marriages, births, and deaths of the family. In millions of homes, reading from the Bible is a part of everyday life.

But these things were not always so. The Bible, now available to all, is a modern miracle. For nearly fifteen hundred years after the death of the Man who walked by Galilee, Bibles were only in manuscript, so expensive that only the richest men could own them. Later there were the Bibles of the Poor, printed from blocks of wood on which were a few pictures, a few words only.

Not until sometime between 1450 and 1455 was there a printed Bible as we know it, the beginning of that torrent of printed Bibles which has carried the sacred words the world over.

Man's three greatest inventions were speech, by which sounds conveyed ideas from speaker to hearer; writing, by which characters represented speech; and printing from moveable type, which made writing the common property of all men.

No invention of machinery or process could have been possible without these; no discovery, no new idea, no conception, could have encompassed the world of men without them.

So far as we know animals do not speak, except in the small language of bark or cry which denominate only elemental ideas-hunger, mating, distress, pleasure. No animals read or write. Only man conveys thought by sound; only from man has come the abstract thought of philosophy, mathematics, science, art. Charity, education, religion, learning are man's gift to man. None of these could have been more than local, had it not been for speech, for writing, for printing.

Throughout the centuries the writings of scholars upon stone, clay, papyrus, parchment, and finally upon paper, resulted in the creation of a caste: men who could read; men who, sitting silently before a manuscript, could follow in their minds the thoughts of other men.

With the growth of learning arose a demand for books; but producing them by means of a quill and brush made them so costly that they were the exclusive possessions of princes - either of the Church or of the State.

Scholars are generally agreed that the art of

printing as we know it had its birth in Germany. In the earliest examples of printing, not only illustrations but text were cut in relief in solid blocks of wood. But it was not until the invention of moveable metal types, capable of innumerable combinations of letters forming words, that printing as we know it came into existence.

It was about 1439 or 1440 that Johann Gansfleisch, known today by his mother's name of Gutenberg, began the experiments that led to his great contribution to civilization—the invention of moveable metal types and the molds in which to make them. Born in Mainz on the Rhine in 1397, he moved thirty years later to Strasbourg, where he lived for nearly twenty years. Most of our knowledge of his life comes from records in the law courts. He formed several partnerships and negotiated a number of loans, but seems to have been so unsuccessful financially that most of these affairs brought him into court. He needed more and more money, according to one document, for rent, workmen's wages, parchment, paper, ink, and "the work of the books." In the 1450's, he lost most of his printing equipment to one of his ex-partners or creditors, Johann Fust, who later, with his son-in-law, became a famous printer of Mainz. Some of these associates, however, seem to have had great trust in the eventual success and value of his work, and to have stayed by him.

For many years it was thought that the famous Gutenberg Bible was his first production, which, considering its perfection, would have been astonishing. It now has been proved that he began on far less ambitious projects. Perhaps the first was a popular, long German poem on the "World judgment," possibly printed in Strasbourg, and one page of which is now in the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz. Then came the Latin grammar, called the Donatus, from the name of its author, of which at least sixteen editions were printed. These and other scraps of printing show that he was experimenting and improving his types. The first dated piece of printing is an indulgence, dated 1454, granted for contributions to the Pope's fund for a campaign against the Turks, who had captured Constantinople in 1453.

Somewhere in or between 1451 and 1455,

Gutenberg must have been at work on the Latin 42-line Bible, the first important effort of the inventor; nor has another book yet been discovered in which he employed the types used in this Bible. As an example of printing it has never been surpassed. Of all the arts, printing at its birth reached perfection more nearly than any other.

The book gives no information as to the date at which it was printed, or the place, or the printer. It has no title-page or colophon; its six hundred and forty-one leaves are unnumbered, and there are no catch words. It is printed in Latin, in large Gothic characters, in double columns and some pages are beautifully and elaborately hand-decorated in color and in gold.

The printing was done both upon vellum and upon paper; which was first used cannot possibly now be determined, but is generally believed that the paper copies are the earliest.

The printing is an imitation of writing, in a brilliant black ink of a quality which has defied the centuries. The paper, too, is of an exceeding beauty and texture. In a copy in the Bibliotheque Nationale, at Paris, there is a manuscript note in which the rubricator, who did the hand illumination, says that he finished his work on the twenty-fourth of August, 1456, adding thereafter, as was not unusual, the word "Alleluia."

The United States owns a perfect and complete Gutenberg Bible. It is on exhibition in the Library of Congress. It came to this nation as part of the Vollbehr Collection of Incunabula (books printed before January 1, 1501) purchased under the authorization provided by an Act of Congress approved by President Hoover on July 3, 1930. The sum of \$1,500,000 was appropriated for the purchase of the entire collection of 3,000 items, one of which was the copy on vellum of the Gutenberg 42-line Bible, known as the Saint Blasius-Saint Paul copy in three volumes. This is one of the three perfect vellum copies known to exist, the other two being in the British Museum in London and the National Library of France in Paris.

The copy which came to the Library of Congress with the Vollbehr Collection was in

the possession of the religious order of Benedictines for nearly five centuries. Until about the year 1794 it was kept at the Abbey of Saint Blasius in the southwestern part of Germany. In the wars growing out of the French Revolution the monks, fearing for the security of their treasures, took this great book away from Saint Blasius to other houses of their order, first in Switzerland, later in Upper Austria, and finally, about 1809, to their Abbey of Saint Paul in the valley of the Lavant River in the eastern part of Carinthia, where it remained until it passed into the hands of its buyer, Dr. Otto H. F. Vollbehr, on August 16, 1930. The price paid by Dr. Vollbehr for the Bible was \$250,000, increased by interest charges and an export tax to a total in excess of \$350,000, the highest price ever paid for a single printed book.

Gutenberg' s first types were cut from apple wood, one of the best for carving, but these did not prove satisfactory. Then he conceived the idea of casting metal type in an engraved matrix and thus laid the foundation for the printing industry of today. At least eighteen years were required to perfect his method. He had also to design and build a press, make all auxiliary equipment, perfect his type metal, and even to make an ink suited to his types.

Circumstances indicate that his invention was motivated by a high purpose, the production of church literature, and, more probably, the Bible. His type faces were cut accurately to reproduce the appearance of manuscript copies of the Bible and required a font of 290 characters.

Although plagued by debt, lawsuits, and unfortunate partnerships, Gutenberg persevered in his purpose and about 1450 or 1451 (exact dates of the Gutenberg Bible are lost in the shadows of history), he began the printing of Jerome' s Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate. As the printing proceeded, it was necessary to alter his type from the 40 lines originally planned to 41 lines and again to 42 lines per column, which meant a costly and heartbreaking delay. Having perfected his fonts, he then proceeded with the 42-line Bible, of which it is believed some 30 copies were printed on fine paper and about 180 copies on vellum.

Gutenberg' s Bible is a technical masterpiece and is acknowledged by printing authorities today as an almost perfect piece of printing, an artistic and finished piece of work. Begun 1450-1451, the Gutenberg Bible was completed sometime in 1454-1455.

Having lost his printing equipment through misfortune and debt, Gutenberg was at last befriended by Adolph II, Prince Elector of Mainz, appointed a courtier, and provided a pension until his death on February 3, 1468 at the age of 70. Thus passed Gutenberg, unhonored by his generation and a business failure by conventional standards.

But Gutenberg was not a failure. He was a working tool in the hands of the Supreme Architect of the Universe and a living example of the saying, "God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." For scarcely had Gutenberg slept with his fathers than printing presses were busy throughout Europe and a slumbering giant began to stir.

Now came Martin Luther, strong, fearless, and defiant, courageously facing death when on October 31, 1517 he dared to post his 95 Theses Against the Abuse of Indulgence at the door of the Castle Church in Wuttenberg. These were printed both in Latin and in German translation and eagerly read and discussed throughout and beyond the bounds of the Empire. Later, while imprisoned at Wartburg, he produced a translation of the Greek New Testament into German, which was published in 1522. He then translated the Old Testament and published the complete Bible in German in 1534.

Although Wycliffe had translated the Vulgate into English about 1378, this was before the invention of printing from moveable type. In 1523 and 1524, Tyndale, a Master of Oxford and England' s greatest scholar of Hebrew and Greek, translated the New Testament into the English vernacular. The Tyndale Bible was printed in Germany and copies smuggled into England, but it was suppressed by the bishops, and Tyndale took refuge in Antwerp. Later he was betrayed, imprisoned, tried for heresy, and condemned, and on October 6, 1536, he was strangled at the stake and his body burned, his last words being, "Lord, open the King of England' s eyes."

The first complete Bible printed in English was that of Coverdale, Bishop of Exeter, who completed his translation in 1535. He was employed by Cromwell to assist in producing the Great Bible of 1539 which was ordered to be placed in all English churches. At Geneva in 1558, he also assisted in the preparation of the Geneva Bible.

The Geneva Bible was the first Bible to be printed in Roman type and with numbered verses, and enjoyed great popularity in England, going through 140 editions in 84 years. It was the Bible of Shakespeare, Milton, and the Puritans, who brought it to America.

With the Reformation accomplished, and printing and paper making processes greatly improved, the Bible became accessible to the English people as well as to those of the European countries.

In 1611, the King James Version brought the Bible into the modern idiom without sacrificing the scholarship and vigor of Tyndale or the delightful mode of expression introduced by Coverdale and thus produced a work which has been classed as supreme in English literature. Of the King James Version in its successive editions, more copies have been printed and sold than of any other book in any language.

The Bible has been translated into 1,118 different languages and distributed to the ends of the earth. A number of Bible Societies here and abroad distribute Bibles wherever they are needed. The American Bible Society has issued 405 million volumes of Scripture in the last 135 years. Bibles for the blind are produced in 34 languages and systems.

Gutenberg' s Bible was forgotten for 300 years but now copies are the most expensive of all rare books. His vital contribution to world enlightenment was the freeing of the Bible from ecclesiastical bondage, and making the Book of Books available to all.

"A thousand years," declared the psalmist, "are in Thy sight as but a day." As we stand at this noontide of a millenium, we find a printed Bible on the Altar of every Masonic

lodge and draw renewed hope from the promise
that in every clime a Mason may find a home
and in every land a brother.

Johann Gutenberg was a man with the love of
the word of God in his heart, who gave to the
world the art of printing. This art is not
only basic to all learning as we know it, its
invention also began the long process of
breaking the power of the priesthood and
making the words of the Great Architect, as
set forth in His Book, the common property of
common men.

POTS

Masonry, according to the general acceptance of the term, is an art
founded on the principles of geometry, and devoted to the service and
convenience of mankind. But Freemasonry, embracing a wider range
and having a nobler object in view, namely, the cultivation and improvement
of the human mind, may with more propriety be called a science, inasmuch
as, availing itself of the terms of the former, it inculcates the
principles of
the purest morality, though its lessons are for the most part veiled in
allegory
and illustrated by symbols.

George Helmer FPS
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PZ Norwood #18 RAM
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