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<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v48/i46/46b00501.htm>**OBSERVER****Bibles du Jour**

By TIMOTHY K. BEAL

Today we are witnessing a burgeoning of bibles. Not the kind you read in a synagogue or church, but the kind you read to master Java scripting. Or to get washboard abs. Or to create the perfect window dressing. From *The Internet Bible* to *The Golfer's Bible* to *The Body Sculpting Bible* (his and hers versions) to *The Curtain Bible*, from *The Runner's Bible* to *The Small Game and Varmint Hunter's Bible*, to *Cocktail: The Drinks Bible for the 21st Century*, there's a bible for anyone who wants to do or be anything.

Calling these kinds of books bibles is not exactly new. *The Shooter's Bible* (previously *The Stoeger Gun Catalog and Handbook*, subtitled *The World's Standard*), appeared in 1940. But today we find more than ever. By my count, something like one in four books published in America over the past two years with "bible" in the title is this kind of bible. Indeed, you're likely to find more bibles in a bookstore's computer section than in its religion section.

Why call these kinds of books bibles? Because it sells, of course. But why? What currency does it give a book to call it a bible? What does this title claim for a book? What does it promise? What does "bible" mean?

It means *comprehensive*. A book called a bible promises to cover all you need to know and understand about its subject, from A to Z, Genesis to Revelation.

It means *authoritative*. A book called a bible claims to be the alpha and the omega, the first and last Word on all things golfing, draping, varmint hunting, whatever, dispensing all the right answers to all the right questions.

It means *exclusive*. A book called a bible asserts itself to be the one and only, without serious competition.

It means *practical*. A book called a bible promises to serve as a reference manual and a dependable guide for how to proceed on the path you've chosen.

And it means *devotional*. A book called a bible treats its subject as something worthy of religious dedication and discipline from practitioners. Its subject literally becomes a religion of the book -- *this* book. Take and read.

A book called a bible claims to be the one and only book for those who are devoted or who want to be

devoted to its subject. Whether or not you know what a turbo charger is, you immediately understand that *Hot Rodder's Bible* is proclaiming itself the ultimate comprehensive authority, guide, and how-to manual for hot-rod devotees. That's what bible means.

That's what it means, but in fact there is no one bible, and there never has been. Even before this new generation of bibles came along, religious bibles were legion. The Jewish Bible, or Tanakh, includes the Torah (the first five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy), Neviim (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings), in that order. The Protestant Bible includes those same books, but in a different order, as well as the New Testament. The Roman Catholic Bible adds a number of Apocryphal scriptures. And many others reflect the biblical traditions of other forms of Christianity alive and well in America. In addition, numerous translations exist of each of those bibles. And behind each of those translations are literally hundreds of manuscripts written in many different languages and spanning centuries.

Neither is any one of the many Jewish and Christian bibles of one voice. Each is the product of multiple oral and literary traditions, multiple voices and pens speaking and writing within many different cultural contexts across hundreds of years. Every one of those bibles is more like a one-volume library than a single book.

As a result, no single bible exemplifies our idea of bible-ness. The prototype is a figment of our cultural imagination, revealing not what "the Bible" is but what we think or even wish it to be. *The Fly Fisherman's Bible* is not to fly fishing what "the Bible" is to religion. Rather, it purports to be to fly fishing what we imagine "the Bible" should be to religion.

A century ago, calling such books bibles would have struck most readers as inappropriate, even sacrilegious. Once I thought I had found a remarkably early example: In 1913 Nora Holm published *The Runner's Bible: Compiled and Annotated for the Reading of Him Who Runs*. But lo and behold, the book had nothing to do with breaking a sweat or beating the pavement. It was a Christian "prayer Bible," a compilation of biblical passages accompanied by Holm's devotional commentaries. Her title alludes to the New Testament use of competitive running as a metaphor for the Christian life -- running to win "the imperishable" wreath of salvation, as the Apostle Paul puts it.

Holm's book is still in print and is well-known in Christian devotional circles. But these days its publishers must take care to distinguish it from Marc Bloom's better-known *The Runner's Bible* for competitive runners and joggers. Indeed, most readers today would assume that a book called *The Runner's Bible* is for someone who wants to win a 10K, not someone who wants to win the imperishable wreath. The revised subtitle on the 1998 edition of Holm's *Runner's Bible* admits as much: *Spiritual Guidance for People on the Run*.

Nowadays calling a book about running a bible doesn't strike many of us as inappropriate, let alone sacrilegious. Maybe that's because mainstream American culture is now in many respects postreligious, indeed post-Christian. Images like crosses and Madonnas and terms like "salvation" and "bible" that were once set apart as sacred and handled exclusively within particular religious traditions have crossed over into mainstream consumer culture where they now circulate in countless new ways, primarily to sell stuff. Even those of us who are in fact religious (even Christian) have grown accustomed to seeing such images and words translated into new venues.

In this light, there *is* a bit of sacrilegious flippancy in calling these kinds of books bibles. Akin to Madonna's and Marilyn Manson's slight smirks as they don holy garb, we pronounce these books bibles with at least

some tongue in cheek, aware that we can use the term that way because it has lost its traditional moorings in the sacred and is now floating freely down the mainstream.

But might there also be a bit of religious longing here? I have to wonder if the growing market for the new kinds of bibles betrays a bit of nostalgia, even amid the tongue-in-cheek flippancy, for that old-time kind of religious authority that "bible" stands for: a comprehensive, exclusive authority that gives guidance and calls for devotion. I say a *bit* of nostalgia. Fundamentalism is the name we give to movements ruled by that kind of nostalgia. Most of us know that we can't go back, and that the desire to do so can be a dangerous fantasy.

Still, what do we make of the increasing popularity of these newfangled bibles in our brave new postreligious world? One thing is for sure: Tongues in cheeks notwithstanding, a market still exists for authority of biblical proportions.

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