

EVOLUTION BY STEVEN HELLER



OF GOD AND GRAPHICS

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS that God revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai were inscribed on stone tablets, according to the Book of Exodus. And so it was written, and so it begat Judeo-Christian typographic design, which continues in various forms to this day.

Granted, this is a rather condensed and simplified account, but, hey, we have limited space to chart the evolution of religious messages—and little was written in the good book about graphic design.

For hundreds of years, scribes laboriously penned biblical tracts and elaborately illuminated many of them (think the Book of Kells). In the mid-1450s Gutenberg issued the 42-line Bible, the first Western book to be printed with a movable-type press. It triggered the greatest communications revolution in history (at least until St. Steve Jobs). Gutenberg's Mainz Bible looked similar to a hand-scribed manuscript, but text types would take precedence as religious missives reached millions.

By the 19th century, countless Bibles, Psalters, hymnals, pamphlets, and other spiritual messages from, by, and about the Lord had been published the world over. Late-19th-century examples were typographically and illustratively conservative, using existing typefaces and engraved illustrations. There were, however, a number

of ecclesiastical typefaces and letterforms, Gothic in look and feel, that signify the Christian aesthetic. Depending on where they are found, they can suggest either the celestial realm or hellfire.

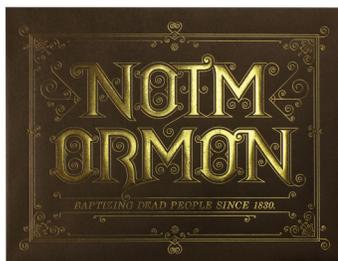
Yet some modern designers, hearing the call, and not content to leave well enough alone, have taken it as their mission to redesign the Bible and its ancillary materials. Who said the Word had to be as somber

and dark as Gustave Doré's engravings?

In 1973 Bradbury Thompson, an alumnus of Washburn College, designed the Washburn College Bible, "the most thorough typographic reassessment of the Bible since Gutenberg," one of its backers claimed. Thompson increased legibility by using Jan Tschichold's Sabon typeface. He also arranged the text in phrases and separated them where the reader would naturally stop. Thompson's Bible was illustrated with 66 old masters, and Josef Albers also contributed art. It took over a decade to produce.

Many years later, Angus Hyland designed covers for "The Pocket Canons," a series separating individual books in the King James Bible. Conceived by Matthew Darby, the series has sold more than a million copies.

In 2007 the British design firm Crush produced a Bible cover that shows the light and dark sides of Biblical narrative. Advertised as for non-"card-carrying Christians," it suggests a carnivalesque Garden of Eden—a far cry from the original intent. But making religious tracts contemporary, like modernizing churches and loosening strictures on religious garb, serves as an invitation to those who want to savor the ritual without enduring the dogma. Plus, it's easier than stone-carving. ■



THE MORMON CHURCH has a peculiar habit: It posthumously baptizes people—from Christopher Columbus to Holocaust victims—as Mormons. Brian Singer, a San Francisco designer, decided to satirize the custom with a letterpressed, foil-stamped Certificate of Baptism from a new religion he calls Notm Ormon. "My goal with this project is to raise awareness of the practice," Singer writes in an e-mail, "and let people decide for themselves if they think it's conscionable."