

PRESS RELEASE

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NEW MOBIA EXHIBIT EXAMINES THE HISTORY OF THE BIBLE IN THE NEW WORLD

RESULTS OF CHRISTIAN EXPANSION AND INNOVATION ON VIEW THIS FALL

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 4, 2010—[The Museum of Biblical Art](#) presents ***A Light to the Nations: America's Earliest Bibles (1532-1864)*** a selection of 29 volumes and historical items drawn from the Rare Bible Collection @ MOBIA. On view October 15 to December 23, 2010, [A Light to the Nations](#) explores the efforts and achievements of early settlers to meet the needs of newly established Christian communities in the Americas and shows how publishing strategies and marketing tactics were created in the process. The rich history at the heart of the current exhibition includes such developments as: the U.S. Congress' endorsement of Aitken's edition of the King James Bible in 1782 (the only instance of such an endorsement); the sale of Bibles in installments and by subscription (1790); and a translation of Luke's Gospel in Aztec or Nahuatl (1830s). The volumes in this collection are intertwined with some of the most important historical developments to take place in Western history, including Columbus' discovery of America.

The Bible was a prized possession of the earliest European colonists and missionaries. Catholic priests and monks, who traveled to America after the Conquistadores, brought their Latin Bibles while British colonists who landed at Jamestown and Plymouth brought their Protestant editions. Spreading the Christian faith was one of the goals of explorers and colonists. This led to the production of Bibles in the Native American languages of Mohawk, Cherokee, and Seneca as well as the Mother Tongues of the missionaries and settlers themselves (i.e. English, Spanish, Portuguese, and German). Also on display are copies of the earliest American Bibles printed in Greek and Hebrew (1800s) as well as a stereotype plate from the 1950s, a modern example of a technology that dates back to 1812.

“The Museum of Biblical Art is honored to display such an important historical resource,” said Dr. Ena Heller, MOBIA executive director. “These rare Scriptures offer tangible evidence of the immense effort and passion of early Christian communities in the New World. This exhibition reinforces MOBIA’s commitment to educating the public on the major influence the Bible has had on our culture.”

The Bibles on view are drawn from the Rare Bible Collection @ MOBIA, a selection of 2,200 printed Bibles, approximately 15 manuscripts, and 42 incunables. On long-term loan from the American Bible Society, it is one of the most comprehensive collections of its kind which documents the history of the printed Bible throughout the ages. Specifically, it is noted for providing valuable insight on the history of the text in its original languages (Hebrew and Greek), the history of Bible translation, as well as the history of book illustration, binding, and typography.

Exhibition Highlights

The Polyglot Psalter: Published by Agostino Giustiniani in 1516, the Polyglot Psalter includes the first biography of Christopher Columbus ever to be printed. In a note appended to Psalm 19:4, commenting on the phrase *in fines mundi* (“to the ends of the world”), Giustiniani explains that the ends of the world had been recently discovered by Christopher Columbus, who was, like himself, a Genoese. The full-scale biography mentions Columbus’ family, birth, and early years in Genoa, his apprenticeship in Portugal, and the voyages that led to the discovery of the New World and the establishment of Spanish colonies there.

The Massachusetts Bible: Printed by John Eliot in 1663, the Massachusetts Bible is the very first written text in the now extinct language of the Massachusetts Indians. A Presbyterian minister who had been educated in Cambridge, Eliot came to America in 1631. Converting the Massachusetts Indians was one of Eliot’s main priorities resulting in his laboring for more than a decade to translate the entire Bible into their language. Eliot created the first written texts in the Massachusetts tongue and the first Bible in any of the languages of the New World.

Early American Editions of the King James Bible: Robert Aitken (1734-1802), a Scottish emigrant who arrived in Philadelphia in 1771, was the first to publish an American edition of the King James text. He was printer to the Continental Congress when he completed an edition of the entire Bible in 1782. Aitken obtained from Congress a resolution praising his Bible as a “pious and laudable undertaking ...

subservient to the interest of religion” and “an instance of the progress of arts” in America. It was the first and last time Congress would recommend a Bible.

Bible publication in America reached a new milestone in 1791, when Isaiah Thomas (1750-1831) produced the first deluxe edition of the King James text. Acclaimed by its contemporaries as the most beautiful book printed in America, it was the first illustrated Bible crafted in the New World. The title page of the folio includes the name of the printer and his address, starting with “United States of America” printed in bold letters.

The Hodge and Campbell folio is an example of the marketing tactics employed to protect against financial ruin. Scottish immigrants Robert Hodge (1746-1813) and Samuel Campbell (1763?-1836) printed their folio in 40 installments over a two-year period. To guarantee a minimum number of buyers, a list of subscribers was drawn. Consisting of 1,300 names, the list was printed at the end of the volume and provides a cross-section of American society and life. George Washington is listed first followed by carpenters, shoe-makers, stone-cutters, masons, weavers, Supreme Court Justice John Jay, and others.

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Support for *A Light to the Nations: America's Earliest Bibles (1532-1864)* and all related programs has been provided by the American Bible Society.

About The American Bible Society:

Headquartered in New York City, the mission of the 193-year-old [American Bible Society](#) is to make the Bible available to every person in a language and format each can understand and afford. Learn more: [AmericanBible.org](#).

About Museum of Biblical Art:

Located near Lincoln Center at 1865 Broadway at 61st Street, [MOBIA](#) presents critically acclaimed art exhibitions while offering an array of affordable arts enrichment programs to visitors of all ages. MOBIA celebrates and interprets art related to the Bible and its cultural legacy in Jewish and Christian traditions through exhibitions, education and scholarship. Past exhibitions have ranged from self-taught art of the American South and medieval liturgical art to the works of Marc Chagall, Albrecht Dürer and Georges Rouault. Upcoming exhibitions will feature work by Louis Comfort Tiffany and by Andy Warhol. Admission to MOBIA's exhibitions is free for members and children under 12 and pay-what-you-wish for adults, with a suggested admission of \$7; Sundays are always free. Museum hours are: Tue., Wed, Fri., Sun.: 10:00 AM-6:00 PM; Thurs: 10:00 AM-8:00 PM; Mon: Closed. Visit [www.mobia.org](#) for more information on current exhibits and public programs.