

Bible companion: A book with presence

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

"The man who delivers my groceries wants a Bible," my mother said, "but he doesn't know which one. What shall I tell him?" I should have had a ready answer for her, but I did not. It was a big question, after all. If she had asked me to recommend a life partner for her deliveryman, I could not have taken the matter more to heart. Say you have one shot at putting a Bible in someone's hands. Say you want it to speak to him, so he cannot put it down—or so at least he remembers where he put it, so he can find it when it calls him across the room. This Bible not only has to sound compelling. It also has to feel right in his hand. It has to have presence.

I did not ask for my first Bible, but my friend Louisa gave it to me anyway. We were sophomores in college. She wanted me to become a Christian so badly that she gave me her own Scofield Reference Bible. It was a hardback with a blue cloth cover. Inside, the thin pages were dented with markings made by a blue ballpoint pen: heavy underlines, exclamation points, ejaculatory comments, lots of cross-references. Louisa had used the same pen to dedicate the Bible to me, right under the dedication her older sister had written to her when the Bible was new.

The book definitely had presence. I treated it like an heirloom, handed down to me by a family I never knew I had. I even became a Christian, more because of Louisa than because of the book. Still, I studied the passages she had underlined. I read the footnotes that went with them, innocent of the dispensational theology I absorbed along the way. I felt as though Louisa had given me the keys to the kingdom, if only I would follow the directions to the locks.

When I took my first religion class, the professor required the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. This struck me as a very stingy volume compared to my Scofield Bible. Where were the footnotes telling me what the text meant? How was I supposed to find anything without the index of subject chain references? I missed Louisa's handwriting, along with Scofield's reminders of where I was in God's plan.

By the end of the semester I was wise to the differences between Bibles. I could tell a paraphrase from a translation. I could tell the voice of one translation from another. Above all, I could tell the difference between the theology of my professor and the theology of Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. While I still missed the cadences of the King James Version, the training wheels were off. I was ready for the Bible to speak its own mysteries to me, without anyone guiding the handlebars.

Now I own a whole shelf of Bibles. Working from left to right, I can trace the evolution of my faith through the Bibles that have sustained me. After the Scofield Bible and the RSV come the Cotton Patch Gospels, which I also discovered in college. Then the New English Bible and the Jerusalem Bible, barely touched. Next to them stands a leather-bound volume, still faintly fragrant, with four parallel translations on each page. Right beside that is Oxford's paperback college edition of the New Revised Standard Version, as floppy and worn as the textbook it is. New arrivals on the shelf include *The Oxford Jewish Study Bible*, *The Message/Remix*, by Eugene Peterson, and *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (NRSV).

I note that I do not own a copy of the New International Version, although I read it regularly in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. I know that evangelical Christians prefer the NIV, but I do not know why. I am vaguely aware that my choice of the NRSV marks me as a liberal—but again, I do not know why. My guess is that it has to do with the inclusiveness of the pronouns in that Bible (at least where the original languages do not preclude them). Pressed, I might have to admit that I prefer the NRSV because it is the version I have lived with longest and know best. I am a southern Democrat and a low-church Episcopalian for roughly the same reasons. The language sounds right to me because it is the language I use.

Besides, now that I am familiar with so many versions of the Bible, I know that there is no translation without interpretation. What matters is to know whose hands I am in: Those of a single translator or a team? A single translator from where in the world? A team that works from a single theology or one that represents the breadth of Christian tradition? I do not ask such questions in order to determine which Bible is the winner. I ask them in order to appreciate the many ways God's word strikes the human ear. As much as I love the Bible, it is God I worship—the God who speaks to me through scripture and creation, including the handiwork of those who created *all* my Bibles.

In the end, I recommended two versions for my mother's deliveryman: *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (NRSV) for his head and *The Message* for his heart. I

wanted to send a whole legal pad full of instructions to go along with them (“Start with Luke. . . . Ask someone to read these with you. . . . Don’t try to figure everything out the first time through”), but in the end that seemed a poor substitute for a blue ballpoint pen. If the guy is lucky, he will find his Louisa. Until then, he has a book with presence enough to keep him company his whole life through.