

Religion Today
January 30-February 5, 2005
The Alphabet: The Heritage of the Canaanites
Jeremy Biles

A recent CBS news article reported on "the biggest trend in making Christianity more mainstream": the "reshaping of the Bible into a contemporary format" ("Bible Magazines: Big Sellers," Thomas Nelson Inc.), is the vanguard of this new wave in biblical fashion, having published, under their "Extreme for Jesus" imprint, such blockbusters as "Extreme Teen Bible."

Among other recent makeovers of the Holy Scripture is "Revolve: The Complete New Testament," a slick piece of biblical merchandising that, at first glance, is indistinguishable from a teen fashion magazine. This is just the point. Responding to adolescent angst about being caught toting a "freaky and intimidating" (that is, more traditionally packaged) Bible, "Revolve" gives teenage girls what they want: "magazines, magazines, magazines."

This "BibleZine" has been momentarily successful, moving more than 30,000 copies in its first month of sales, making it a best-selling Bible in 2003. A teenage guy's version of the Bible called "Refuel," modeled on popular men's magazines, is also available from Nelson, as is a growing number of other niche BibleZines.

"Revolve," whose target audience is females from 12 to 18, is adorned with a glossy cover graced by the manifestly beatific faces of three grinning girls. Reminiscent of countless other teen-oriented magazines, the cover is decked out with eye-catching swatches of text. But there's a difference. Revolve's headlines convert the titillating into the pious ("Are You Dating a Godly Guy?") and appropriate edgy teen lingo into the rhetoric of Christian commitment ("Radical Faith: What Scripture Really Means").

Among many other noteworthy features of the glitzy BibleZine are the following: first, "Revolve" offers Thomas Nelson's copyrighted New Century Version (NCV) of the New Testament, a thoroughly contemporary rendition of the scriptures that, as editors "Kate and Laurie" explain in their orientation note, "avoids difficult words" and "puts figures of speech and idiomatic expressions in language that even children understand."

"Revolve" is -- mercifully -- devoid of ads (though in a very real sense, the whole magazine is an ad for itself and other products in its line). But also conspicuously absent

are explicitly religious images.

The precocious teenage sexuality exploited in other fashion mags geared toward this age group is also neutralized in "Revolve." Guys and gals alike are fashionably attractive without appearing overtly salacious. Similarly, the advice featured in the "Blab" sidebars punctuating the pages attempts to be at once conservative and hip, condoning male dominance and condemning homosexuality in language that is 'totally cool': "God made guys to be the leaders. That means they lead in relationships"; "the Bible clearly says that homosexuality is wrong ... It's against God"; "try being a contagious Christian."

What are we to make of a work that so blatantly mixes the sacred with the secular? Focusing on American religious life, Colleen McDannell, author of "Material Christianity," points out that while today's vigorous Christian retailing campaigns have reached new heights in merchandising religious paraphernalia, this kind of thing is really nothing new. "American religious life" has always exhibited a thoroughly "material dimension"; the sacred has never been rigorously 'set apart' from the profane. Indeed, refuting Durkheim's claim that "the religious life and the profane life cannot exist in the same place," McDannell insists that religious devotional practices are largely characterized by the "scrambling" of the sacred and the profane.

Religion and popular culture are not separate realms; they are thoroughly enmeshed in American life.

Debates may abound as to whether religious zeal or profit margins drive innovations such as extreme Bible makeovers. But beyond dispute is that -- whatever the motivation, and for better or worse -- the venerable tradition of scrambling faith and fashion, the sacred and the secular, is thriving.

Jeremy Biles holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School and is the managing editor of "Sightings."