

## **A vellum copy of the Gutenberg Bible—the book that marked the beginning of the printed word in the Western world**

Biblia Latina [Gutenberg Bible]. Mainz: Johann Gutenberg, Johann Fust, Peter Schoeffer, ca. 1455. volumes 1 and 2: 15 3/4 inches x 11 3/8 inches (400 x 289 mm); volume 3: 15 7/8 inches x 11 3/8 inches (403 x 289 mm), 3 volumes: 1282 pages.

The Gutenberg Bible—the first major work printed in Europe—takes its name from Johann Gutenberg of Mainz, Germany, who began experimenting with casting movable or reusable type in the 1440s. By about 1450 he had perfected his technique, and soon afterward he began work on the Bible. With backing from Johann Fust, a wealthy Mainz lawyer, Gutenberg and his workmen produced some 160 or 180 copies of the large folio Bible; about a quarter of the total were printed on vellum (fine parchment made from calfskin) and the remainder on paper.

The Bible was finished by March 1455; Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, described it in a letter to a friend, saying that the script was large and easily read even without glasses. Each copy is nearly 1,300 pages, and measures approximately 16 by 12 inches. Most of the Bibles were bound by their first owners in two volumes; the copy now in the Library of Congress was divided into three volumes in the early sixteenth century and received a new binding of pigskin over wooden boards.

The Library of Congress Gutenberg Bible is one of three perfect examples printed on vellum known today; the others are at the British Library and at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. In all, forty-eight largely complete copies of the Bible survive.

The earliest owners of the Bible now in Washington were the Benedictine monks of St. Blasius, in Germany's Black Forest, who acquired it soon after it was printed and kept it in their monastery until the French Revolution. During the Napoleonic era, as French troops advanced eastward over the Rhine, the monks moved the Bible to a Benedictine abbey in Einsiedeln, Switzerland. Shortly thereafter it, too, became unsafe and the monks fled

across the Alps to another cloister on Mt. Pyhrn in Austria. In 1809 the friars found safe haven at the abbey of St. Paul, where the Bible stayed for over a hundred years, until the monastery became desperate for funds following World War I and was forced to sell its greatest treasure.

The Bible, along with 3,000 other incunables, was purchased by the Library of Congress in 1930, creating the foundation for the nation's collection of fifteenth-century books. Congress readily appropriated \$1.5 million requested by Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam even though the country was in the depths of the Great Depression. Today, Gutenberg's Bible is on display in the Great Hall of the Library, viewed by millions of people every year.

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