Googling the Scriptures – Jim Kapoun

Biographical Information:
Jim Kapoun, MDIV-MLS, is Director of Library and Information Services at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio. Before coming to Antioch, he was Associate Director of Maag Library at Youngstown State University in Ohio. (2009-2011), Library Director at Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa (2004-2009). Previous library positions have been with Mankato and Southwest State Universities in Minnesota, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, and Penn State University. Kapoun holds an MLS from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a MDIV from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. His research interests included study habits of clergy as well as undergraduate students, generational use of libraries, and collection development of undergraduate libraries.
Abstract

A pastor’s dream is having an infinite amount of information available to craft a sermon on the go. While most trained pastors understand and have been exposed to traditional resources, time and convenience hamper the writing experience of sermons on a weekly basis. During my time at Waldorf College in Iowa I held a workshop with area pastors on how to find information for sermon preparation. They indicated to me during the workshop that this infinite resource was available to them called Google. Google was fast, convenient, and even had prepared ‘open source’ sermons for use. Biblical texts were exegetically broken down in many viewpoints which made inclusiveness even easier.

This paper is a report from a series of three workshops working with pastors on finding resources for sermons. Included is a pre-workshop survey in which they explained their research methodology and knowledge of both academic and spiritual based sermon aids, and general knowledge of computer skills. From this survey the workshops took on the question; “Is ‘Googling the scriptures’ the way to write a sermon?” The paper also explores the conversations and results of the workshops. By the third workshop we constructed a sermon aid user guide and I revealed how ‘pastors’ can use an academic library in sermon preparation.
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As library director of a small college library in Iowa I had the privileged of working with the local ministerial group. This group was comprised of 14 area clergy of various denominations. They met as a group monthly for support and mentorship, information exchange, and interdenominational program exchanges. In 2008 I was asked to provide seminars on using the library for both them and their parishioners. Since our college library was the closest in proximity to the 14 parishes we opened our doors to the ministerial group. In order to understand the library’s role and their intent in January of 2008 I sent out to each of them a survey outlining what they would like covered during the course of the year. Later that month we met to review the surveys (of which I received 100% participation) and the clergy indicated they really wanted seminars on sermon and bible study preparation. Specially, several of them acknowledge that in this digital world there must be a ‘best practice’ to sermon research.

To plan for the seminars I planned out that each seminar would build on each other. The first seminar (March 2008) would be an analysis of current practices of sermon preparation. The second seminar (May 2008) would be an analysis of materials and resources in a variety of formats available for sermon preparation, and the third seminar (October 2008) will be the group using and critiquing the formats and preparing a user guide of resources for sermon preparation.

**Seminar One (March 2008):**
To prepare for our first meeting I sent out a detailed questionnaire addressing the current practices of researching to formulate a sermon (appendix one). Fourteen surveys were sent out and all were returned, some more complete than others but it provided a good data sample for the meeting. The questionnaire was deliberately anonymous since the group number was small.

Responses:
1. Currently, please list the print materials you consult the most for sermon preparation, include all versions of the Bible.
14/14 Consulted bibles:
   • 10 New International Version
   • 2 A Study Bible
   • 2 New Revised Standard Version

Other resources:
   • 5 Peakes Commentary
   • 8 Concordance to the particular verses
   • 5 A biblical dictionary / 3 identified New Interpreter’s dictionary of the Bible
   • 2 Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible
   • 5 Reference to either the Greek or Hebrew lexicon translation aid for the particular text
   • 3 Indicated some exegetical series is consulted but not consistently
      ▪ Anchor bible series
      ▪ Augsburg bible series
      ▪ Calvin Commentaries
      ▪ New Interpreter’s bible series
      ▪ Word Bible Commentary
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2. Currently, please list the most common electronic resources you use for sermon preparation. 14/14 consulted Google and as an electronic resource this is the first place they started. 3 indicated, however, they bookmarked their favorite sites.

- 13 Bible Study Tools on-line
- 11 Bible resources on-line
- 9 Biblical resource societies
- 5 Group Publishing ministry resources
- 3 Indicated respective church affiliation web sites
- 2 Catholic resources organization

3. As best you can break down the averages between using print vs electronic for each sermon preparation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Print / Electronic</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>25/75</td>
<td>14.</td>
<td>30/70</td>
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</table>

Composite Average: Print 35 to Electronic 65

4. In sermon preparation besides a bible, what is the first print resource you consult and what is the first electronic resource. Where do you go first, print or electronic?

- For print a concordance or dictionary tied and Google was the first electronic place to consult. After consulting a bible 13 of 14 indicated that electronic resources are their starting place and 7 indicated they consult the bible texts online with the NIV the most popular (5) and the generic biblical texts on-line with 2.

5. Do you consult other resources for sermon preparation? (e.g. library, personal interviews or stories, colleagues, seminary or college faculty, parishioners)

- Colleagues
- Parishioners
- Personal Stories/past experiences
- Newspapers or other local venues
- Seminary Faculty
- Interviews
- Library, public

I prepared this information in a report to the group and distributed it two weeks before the meeting. Our first meeting was to focus on the results and get a clear snapshot of sermon research method(s) by comparing and contrasting and to encourage robust conversation on the results. We met the end of March 2008 for 2 hours and initially the group was not surprised by the results. They all agreed that the electronic access was vital to sermon preparation. We acknowledged that for this group age played little to no factor on the electronic choice,
debunking a myth that older people (50+) tend to not use electronic resources. From statistics as of 2008 Google’s estimates the average age of users is above 33 and Facebook, while smaller than in 2012, the average age was 23 but climbing. However, average age of e-mail usage in 2008 was 54.5 (Jones, 2009). Six of the members of the group identified themselves over 50 and all of them used electronic resources liberally. Where the division of age came into play was the discussion of print resources and what was taught at individuals’ formal seminary education. With the exception of one person everyone else was self taught with electronic resources. They all acknowledged that without Google electronic resources would be as hard to use as most of the print resources.

The majority of the discussion centered on the use of Google. We created a list of ‘reasons why you use Google’ and the results are as follows:

1. Best use of time
2. Easiest to find information
3. Gave a comprehensive view of the resources to use

It was unanimous that Google saved time and most commented they could not create a sermon without Google. Google provided a quick and covenant interconnection to the array of theological viewpoints since the most important factor in sermon preparation was the lack of time to prepare. Antidotal, Google could cut up to 4 hours off the sermon prep time.

While some members had favorite web sites bookmarked for use, everyone used Google to find information in general. All admitted to using a ‘keyword’ approach and appreciated that flexibility as to some of the control vocabulary in printed and certain web sites. I asked the group if they used Yahoo; Ask Jeeves; Dogpile; or Religion Explorer. All of them knew about Yahoo and the majority of them had a Yahoo e-mail address but preferred Google because it was quicker. Only a couple had used Ask Jeeves or Dogpile and no one heard of Religion Explorer. I told them that Religion Explorer was a Google index of religion and theology. I showed them the search engine but consensus from the group was Google still looked quicker.

“Google was fast, convenient, and even had prepared ‘open source’ sermons for use. Biblical texts were exegetically broken down in many viewpoints which made inclusiveness even easier.” was a quote from a group member advocating that Google gave him a comprehensive view. I asked the group a follow up question on open source sermons and wanted to know if they used part or all of prepared sermons online. Everyone admitted to using prepared posted sermon or parts of them and 5 of the 14 admitted to using entire sermons tweaking small amounts to make it relevant to their congregation.

We switched our conversation to print materials. Other than Bibles here is where age did play into print knowledge; the older the person the more they knew about print resources. 6 of the 14 admitted they have not used a concordance since seminary and 9 of the 14 do not use print commentaries for sermon preparation. Those that do use a print commentary prefer Peake’s. Antidotal comments as to why they do not use print include:

1. I use word processing and print is hard to cut and paste.
2. Google allows me to search at one time many points of view and with print I need lots of material.
3. Takes to long to use print, my time is valuable.
4. I am unfamiliar with what print sources to use for a sermon; print sources are more for scholarly research.
In preparation for seminar two I would type up a summation sheet and send it to each group member for reflection. The group was now aware of how current practices from peers and were eager to try something new or different for future sermon preparation. To aid in this discovery mode I challenged each individual in the group to make an appointment with me in the library in April (an especially a rich month due to Holy Week and Easter) to discuss their sermon research and view resources used. This interview would be confidential but eventually we would share results with the entire group. Each member would log in a journal every step in the research process from the first reading of the scripture to the last resource consulted and then would bring the sermon and journal into me at the library and we would ‘find’ at least 3 resources online and 3 resources in print not used in the preparation. The pastors were also free to come in more than once to work with me on any research as long as we logged the research process. I would make an anonymous copy of everyone research and prepare a report to the group for discussion and review at our May meeting.

Seminar Two (May 2008):

The designated interview month was a success and I saw every pastor at least once during the month of April. Several maintained open communications through e-mail. The summary report distributed to the group:

1. Number of personal visits: 34
   
   5 visits by 1 member = 5
   4 visits by 2 members = 8
   3 visits by 1 member = 3
   2 visits by 8 members = 16
   2 visits by 2 members = 2

2. Number of E-mail questions/reflections: 47

3. Sermon Sunday or Special Topic:
   
   3 for Good Friday
   3 for Easter Sunday
   5 for First Sunday in Easter
   2 for Second Sunday in Easter
   1 for Fourth Sunday in Easter

4. Number who used Google: 14
   
   10-15 times = 3
   06-09 times = 7
   01-05 times = 4

5. Electronic Sites used (items in bold was a recommended resource):

   Bible Commentaries http://www.studylight.org/com/
   Bible Gateway.com http://www.biblegateway.com/
   Bible History http://www.bible-history.com/
   Bible Land Photos http://bibleplaces.com/
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**Bible Study Helps** http://www.uu.edu/centers/biblical/biblestudy/
**Bible Study Resources** www.bible.org
**Biblical Spirituality.org articles** http://www.biblialspirituality.org/
Campus Crusade for Christ International resources http://www.ccci.org/
Catholic.org http://www.catholic.org
Christianity Today.com http://www.christianitytoday.com
**Christian Classics Ethereal Library** http://www.ccel.org/shortlist.html
Christian Classics “World Wide Study Bible” http://www.ccel.org/wwsb/
E-sword.net Bible study tools http://www.e-sword.net/
Evangelical Sermon Outlines, Free Evangelical Christian Podcasts
    kenbirks.com/evangelical-sermon-outlines.htm
Faith Under Fire http://www.faithunderFire.com
Family.org articles http://www.family.org/topics/
Gospelcom.net http://www.gospelcom.net/
Insight for Living http://www.insight.org
**New Testament Canon.org articles** http://www.ntcanon.org/
**Old Testament Gateway.com** http://www.otgateway.com/
Pastors.com leadership articles http://www.pastors.com/
Pastors.org articles http://www.pastors.org/
Presbyterian Church http://www.pcusa.org
Read the Bible: http://www.elca.org/
Reformed Sermons http://www.sermon.org/
Religion-Online.org articles http://www.religion-online.org/edu/vr/
SermonCentral.com http://www.sermoncentral.com/
Sermons Online http://www.sermononline.org/
Visual Sermons http://www.instone-brewer.com/

6. Paper items used (items in bold was a recommended):

   14 Bibles
   - American Standard Version
   - Amplified Bible
   - English Standard Version
   - Good News Translation
   **Greek Bible**
   - King James Version
   **New American Standard Bible**
   - New International Version
   - New King James Version
   - New Life Version
   - New Revised Standard
   **Revised Standard Study Bible (Oxford)**
   - Today's New International Version
   - Young's Literal Translation

10 Dictionaries

**The Anchor Bible Dictionary**
Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology
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The Dictionary of Historical Theology
Dictionary of Popes and the Papacy
Easton's Bible Dictionary
Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary
The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship
Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church
Strong’s Biblical Dictionary
Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology

23 Commentaries
Abingdon New Testament Commentary
Anchor Bible
Apollos Old Testament Commentary
Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament
Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
Baker Commentary on the Old Testament
Calvin's Commentaries
Black's New Testament Commentary
Expositor's Bible Commentary
Harper New Testament Commentaries
Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary
Interpretation
International Critical Commentary
New American Commentary
New Century Bible Commentary
New Interpreter's Bible
New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
New International Commentary
New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV Application Commentary
Old Testament Library
Sacra Pagina
Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
Word Biblical Commentary

13 Other Items
New Dictionary of Biblical Theology.
Evangelical Dictionary of Theology.
Dictionary of Paul and His Letters.
Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible.
Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy
The Encyclopedia of Religion
New Catholic Encyclopedia
International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
Oxford English Dictionary
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7. Other preparatory items:
   - 06 Local newspapers
   - 04 National newspapers
     - USA Today
     - New York Times (2)
     - Wall Street Journal
   - 02 Personal interviews

Our agenda was quite simple, review the results of the survey and review the research process using both on-line and print resource material. At our meeting we discussed each question separate and then planned on putting it all together. For question one and visiting the library the group unanimously agreed it was beneficial to their preparation. Most of the group members believed that the college library was not available for them to use and greeted the help and access as a welcomed bonus.

The group acknowledged that the Holt Week and Easter season was the most challenging time to write sermons. Several complained about ‘burn out’ and using a sermon from an on-line repository was a huge help during and after the hectic demands of the season. We talked at length about using sermons on-line and most did not find it wrong and they would be open to sharing their sermons on-line, but none had done so up to this time.

Google was in one opinion, “a revolutionary way to conduct research since the invention of the book.” The entire group agreed that Google probably cut their sermon preparation in half and no matter what would continue to use the search engine. I emphasized that Google itself is not the issue but how and what you access could be problematic. We took some time to review some of the web sites used by the group. At random we reviewed 10 website for accuracy, authority, and usability:

1. Bible Gateway: we found 10 broken links; 5 inaccurate biblical references; the group was annoyed with the product selling but would not deter using the site.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - quick access to many biblical translations
   - liked the textual comparison feature

2. Campus Crusade for Christ International resources: we found 2 broken –out dated links; highly subjective to one point of view.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - appealed to the younger aged people
   - appreciated the different point of view

3. E-sword.net Bible study tools: had to subscribed/donate to receive most services (5 in the group donated to this site); slanted to a single point of view.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - while one person’s point of view quite scholarly and exegetical
   - analysis of the ancient texts in greek and hebrew
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4. Evangelical Sermon Outlines, Free Evangelical Christian Podcasts: extremely Pentecostal, 7 inaccurate biblical references in sermons, self serving to one person.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - widely used by parishioners
   - open source of sermons

5. Faith under Fire: multiple inaccurate exegetical references, strong conservative viewpoint, inflammatory, web site is mirror of TV/Radio broadcasts.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - widely accessed by parishioners
   - sermons resonate with congregation

6. Gospelcom.net : 2 inaccurate biblical references, great forum for all types of pastors, great resource for devotional and prayer material.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - great resource for devotional and prayer material
   - good sermons, both in intellectual and spiritual development
   - serves topical needs

7. Insight for Living: useful sermons albeit a bit evangelical, slanted to one point of view, part of a long time radio network.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - popular main stream Christian program
   - useful “every day” advice and use of sermon allegories

8. Sermon Central: commercial, dubious references to material (found 14 inaccurate biblical references), vast resources to explore.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - multiple access points
   - great sermon material

9. Sermons Online: open source of sermons, not sure if submissions are from ordained clergy.
   Why did you access/use this site?
   - many sermons to listen to and use

10. Visual Sermons: only non US site reviewed, many images to use for sermons and bible studies, copyright issues, sermons from one point of view.
    Why did you access/use this site?
    - visuals and sermons
    - logically constructed website, ease of use

Book references did not spike up until the visit to the library. Only 5 indicated (other than reading the Bible) they consulted books before visiting the library. Only after the reference consultation did the group use print material. Most in the group found the biblical dictionaries the most helpful but the majority of the group thought that both the visit and consulting the print material increased the quality of their sermons. They did acknowledge it took more time but the extra effort was worth it. For our next session (October 2008) we will continue to review the print material out together a best practice resource guide. I will continue to work with the group members’ one on one during the summer to aid our evaluative discussions during our next meeting.
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Seminar Three (October 2008):

At our third meeting we started the forum analyzing Google searches. I ask all participants to write a search statement and I would search it with Google. We looked at the Google results and determined that after 4-5 sites the other ‘hits’ were of poorer quality, some sites we could not identify the content by the name. This opened up discussion as many group members never thought of Google this way; that most of the results were questionable. And what of the results we thought were reputable. We analyzed the results using my 5 criteria for web evaluation. (Kapoun, 1998) Once again, after analysis most sites had serious academic or copyright problems. We then reviewed a select number of sites used in our April 2008 list. Especially in the sermon ‘mills’ countless copyright along with plagiarism was noted. Careful reading of the sermons exposed serious theological problems and inconsistencies with the biblical texts. We did create a list of web sites, however, which met the 5 criteria we used for examination. We then turned our attention to the print material. I brought in all the print material used from the April 2008 meeting and we paired creating 7 groups. Each group received some of the books and then examined the material adopting the 5 criteria to the books. A half hour later we reported our results to the entire group. The group gave most of the books a favorable response stating that most material met or exceeded the 5 criteria. The group created a list of the best of the books from their review.

Putting it all together:
During the last hour of the third session we created a study guide for the group and will distribute it beyond northern Iowa. The guide includes Jim’s 5 criteria on web evaluation along with suggested lists of web and print material to use for sermon preparation. (Kapoun, 1998) All the web sites and books met or exceeded the 5 criteria (See Appendix 2). Antidotal comments from the group includes an acknowledgement that applying standards to print and web site (especially web sites) are worth the extra time to produce a good sermon. Four of the members pledged not to use sermons from sermon mills although if the sermons come from an expressed open source location extracting parts of the sermon for your own work is ok as long as you cite the extraction. The group expressed an interest to meet once a year to review and revise the recommended list.

Notes:


Appendix One
Questionnaire on sermon preparation.
Greater Winnebago County Ministerial Group
February 2008

Please answer all questions as best you can and submit to Jim by February 28, 2008

1. Currently, please list the print materials you consult the most for sermon preparation, include all versions of the Bible.

2. Currently, please list the most common electronic resources you use for sermon preparation.

3. As best you can break down the averages between using print vs electronic for each sermon preparation?

4. In sermon preparation besides a bible, what is the first print resource you consult and what is the first electronic resource. Where do you go first, print or electronic?

   Follow up: do you access the bible electronically? If so, indicate which site:

5. Do you consult other resources for sermon preparation? (e.g. library, personal interviews or stories, colleagues, seminary or college faculty, parishioners)

Use back is necessary…submit electronically to XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Evaluating Web Site searched through Google or other search engines:

1. Accuracy of Web Documents
   - Who wrote the page and can you contact him or her?
   - What is the purpose of the document and why was it produced?
   - Is this person qualified to write this document?
   - Make sure author provides e-mail or a contact address / phone number
   - Know the distinction between an author and a Webmaster

2. Authority of Web Documents
   - Who published the document and is the publisher separate from the Webmaster?
   - Check the domain of the document; what institution publishes this document?
   - Does the publisher list his or her qualifications?
   - What credentials are listed for the author or authors?
   - Where is the document published?
   - Check the URL domain.

3. Objectivity of Web Documents
   - What goals/objectives does this page meet?
   - How detailed is the information?
   - What opinions (if any) are expressed by the author?
   - Determine if page is a mask for advertising; if so, information might be biased.
   - View any Web page as you would an infomercial on television. Ask yourself why was this written and for whom?

4. Currency of Web Documents
   - When was it produced?
   - When was it updated?
   - How up-to-date are the links (if any)?
   - How many dead links are on the page?
   - Are the links current or updated regularly?
   - Is the information on the page outdated?
5. Coverage of the Web Documents

- Are the links (if any) evaluated and do they complement the document’s theme?
- Is it all images or a balance of text and images?
- Is the information presented cited correctly?
- If page requires special software to view the information, how much are you missing if you don’t have the software?
- Is it free, or is there a fee, to obtain the information?
- Is there an option for text only, or frames, or a suggested browser for better viewing?

Recommended Web Sites:

- Bible Commentaries http://www.studylight.org/com/
- Bible Gateway.com http://www.biblegateway.com/
- Bible History http://www.bible-history.com/
- Bible Land Photos http://bibleplaces.com/
- Bible Study Helps http://www.uu.edu/centers/biblical/biblestudy/
- Bible Study Resources www.bible.org
- Biblical Spirituality.org articles http://www.biblialspirituality.org/
- Old Testament Gateway.com http://www.otgateway.com/
- Pastors.org articles http://www.pastors.org/
- Sermons Online http://www.sermonsonline.org/

Resource Material (call numbers given when possible):

**Bibles**

- American Standard Version
- English Standard Version
- Good News Translation
- Greek Bible
- King James Version
- New American Standard Bible
- New International Version
- New King James Version
- New Revised Standard
- Revised Standard Study Bible (Oxford)
- Today's New International Version

**Dictionaries**

- The Anchor Bible Dictionary
  BS440 .A54
- The Dictionary of Historical Theology
  BT21.2 .D53
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- The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship
  BV173 .N49 2002
- Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church
  BR95 .O82 1977

**Commentaries**

- Abingdon New Testament Commentary
- Anchor Bible Series
  BS192.2
- Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament
  BS2785.3
- Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
- Baker Commentary on the Old Testament
- Calvin's Commentaries
  BS2625 .C22
- Black's New Testament Commentary
- Expositor's Bible Commentary
  BS491.2 .E9
- Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary
- Interpretation
- International Critical Commentary
  BS491 .16
- New American Commentary
- New Century Bible Commentary
- New Interpreter's Bible
  BS491.2 .N484 1994
- New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
- New International Greek Testament Commentary
- NIV Application Commentary
- Tyndale New Testament Commentary
- Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
- Word Biblical Commentary
  BS491.2 .W67

**Other Encyclopedias and Dictionaries Items**

- Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings
  BS1308 .D53
- Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible
  BS440 .D495
- The Encyclopedia of Religion
  BL31 .E43
- The Harper Atlas of the Bible
  G2230 .H47
- New Catholic Encyclopedia
  BX841 .N4 2003
- Oxford English Dictionary
  PE1617.O94 B47