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Rare Bible uncovered at Drew University in Madison

Student discovers first edition of 1611 King James Bible

By CHRISTINE LEE Staff Writer Dec 9, 2015



By chance, graduate student and library worker Brian Shetler at Drew University in Madison made a stunning discovery: a first edition of the 1611 King James Bible inside a box in the university's library.

MADISON – When Drew University graduate student and library worker Brian Shetler went to search for books to show an undergraduate history class on Oct. 28, he never imagined that he would discover an uncatalogued treasure.

“This particular class was focused on 16th and 17th century England and so we were trying to find material that was of that time period,” said Shetler, originally from Pennington. “I pulled about 40 books or so onto a cart and brought them down, and one of them that I came across was the Bible itself — and on the box that it was in it just said ‘Bible 1611 R. Barker’.”

It turns out the Bible that Shetler found working at the United Methodist Archives and History Center at the university in Madison isn’t just any Bible. It is a rare first edition of the 1611 King James Bible, of which less than 200 extant copies are known to exist, according to Donald Brake, a Biblical scholar and author of “A Visual History of the King James Bible.”

The “R. Barker” printed on the box is Robert Barker, the original printer of the treasured book.

Real Thing?

“I thought it was either a reproduction or just mislabeled or something; I didn’t think it was actually the real thing,” recalled Shetler, who’s pursuing a doctorate in book history.

“Once we opened it, we knew for sure that there was a very good chance that it was real.”

It was Cassie Brand, a Methodist associate and special collections cataloger, and Jesse Mann, a theological librarian at the university at 36 Madison Ave. who authenticated the rare book.

“My first reaction was, ‘No, no, we can’t have that’,” Brand remembered.

But the Bible was authenticated by confirming 35 points of distinction for that edition, including typos, misspellings and particular images.

Most notably, the Drew copy is known as the “He Bible” because it mistakenly refers to the Biblical figure of Ruth as “he.”

The copy is missing a few pages, including a title page, but is otherwise in remarkable condition, according to university officials.

From 1880s

Brand said the book isn't some new addition to the library, as there are records indicating the book has been at the university for a very, very long time.

"As best we can tell, we received it sometime in the 1880s," she said. "I'm inclined to believe that it's a purchase, because the university was purchasing a lot of theological texts about that time to try to build the library."

Brand adds there are indications that Drew's library used the rare Bible over those many years, including as a feature in a silent film created to promote the university in 1925. It also was on display in 1935 as part of a Bible exhibit.

It was former rare book librarian Julia Baker who included the Bible in a special collection at the university in the 1970s. That's how the book wound up placed in the box in the archives.

"Most of the staff has turned over in the past 40 years, so the people who did know about it are no longer here," Brand explained. "It's not new to the library — it's new to us."

'Amazing'

For Shetler, discovering the rare Bible was something he didn't think was possible.

"This is one of those things that you wish happened all the time, and it doesn't all the time — but when it does, you really get excited about it," he said.

Drew University President MaryAnn Baenninger called the book's uncovering in the archives an "amazing discovery."

"In the last two months, one of our fellows won the Nobel Prize for Medicine, two of our faculty members were finalists for the National Book Award — and one of our graduate students found this rare first edition of the King James Bible! I am more proud than ever to be at Drew," Baenninger said.

The King James Bible now is featured as part of an exhibit of discovered or donated treasures in the library's archives. Other artifacts include letters from U.S. presidents, World War II uniforms, and magazines from the David Johnson Science Fiction Collection.