

From The History Corner

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What is the Gutenberg Bible and why is it important? The “Gutenberg” or “Mazarin” bible was published in Germany in 1454-1455. The importance of this book lies not in its content. The content is freely available to almost anyone in the world who wants it. Rather, the book’s importance lies in what it represents and how it was made. It represents a tremendous leap in the development of literacy within Western Europe. It was the first major book in Europe printed from moveable type on a printing press. Johannes Gutenberg (also known as Johannes Gensfleisch) invented movable interchangeable metal type which was uniform in size and which could be reused. He also invented an ink that adhered to metal type thus making this printing of this book possible. Shortly following its publication, this Bible was sold at the Frankfurt Book Fair. At that time, it cost the equivalent of several years of pay for the average clerk. A surviving intact copy of this book was auctioned for over \$5.4 million dollars in 1987.

Printing had been in use long before the Gutenberg bible. The use of block printing (the carving of images or words in reverse which could be printed onto an object) had been in documented use by the Chinese as early as 600 A.D. Paper began in use in Europe by the 1100 A.D. The process of using block printing reached Europe sometime around 1300 A.D. One of the most common items to be made using this process were playing cards or depictions of religious scenes.

Outside of printing presses, books or documents were copied by hand by monks or scribes during the medieval ages. This laborious process took months for the creation of single book. In general, scribes used parchment made out of animal skin (usually goats, sheep or calves). In Medieval Europe, most of these books were written in Latin, the language of literacy among the monks and scribes. As a result, non-religious literature was extremely rare.

Gutenberg’s inventions were revolutionary concepts which made the mass printing of books practicable because they could now be done quickly and less expensively. Despite his efforts to keep his process a secret, printing presses using his inventions quickly spread throughout Europe. By 1482, these printing presses could be found in over 111 cities. Printing presses were in over 250 cities by 1499.

The impact of the printing press using this process upon Europe was extraordinary. It made books more commonly available to people outside of the clergy and the aristocracy. Books and documents could now be printed in the native language of the printers and their languages became more formalized as rules of spelling and punctuation took hold. Europeans could now read and write in their own native tongues. This process, in turn, encouraged the development of literacy throughout Europe. Thousands of books covering scientific and medical theories were published in Europe. This proliferation and easier access to ideas and theories encouraged further development in these fields among scientists and doctors. Maps and travel books became more commonly available thus allowing for easier commerce and trade. The printing press literally exploded the impact of the Renaissance throughout Europe. It is estimated, by some historians, that there were over eight million books made by using movable printing type in Europe by 1503.

What about the man who created the means for this informational revolution? Johannes Gutenberg, the son of Mainz aristocrats, was born between 1394 and 1404. There is very little information known about him outside of tax and Court records. He was a master craftsman in gem cutting and polishing as well as a goldsmith. He entered into business for the development of the printing press with Johann Fust in 1450. The security for the loan was Gutenberg’s equipment and material. Herr Fust became a full partner in the business in 1452. In 1455, Herr Fust sued

for the repayment of his loan and interest. He won the lawsuit and took possession of Gutenberg's equipment and business. Gutenberg never saw any of the monies that resulted from his labor and inventions. He became blind in 1465 and abandoned the printing business. Despite the fact that he received a pension from the Archbishop of Mainz in 1465, he died a pauper on February 3, 1468. Ironically, a single page of the Bible which bears his name today has fetched prices in excess of \$75,000.

What about the book which bears his name? There are less than 60 substantially intact copies of the Gutenberg Bibles which survive today. One of the copies of this book is on display at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Other copies are located in the libraries of Harvard, Yale, the University of Texas, the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress.

Sources: Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers, A History of Man's Search to Know his World and Himself* (Random House, 1983); John H. Lienhard, *How Invention Begins* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Stephen Feinstein, *Johannes Gutenberg: The Printer who Gave Words to the World* (Enslow Publishers, Inc., 2008); Milton Meltzer, *Great Inventions, The Printing Press* (Benchmark Books, 2004); Richard Tames, *The Printing Press, A Breakthrough in Communications* (Heinsmann Library, 2006); Randall Haven, *100 Greatest Science Inventions of All Time* (Libraries Unlimited, 2006); <http://www.historyguide.org> (the printing press); <http://www.flowofhistory.com>; webs sites for the New York Times, Huntington Library, Library of Congress, the University of Texas and the New York Public Library.

