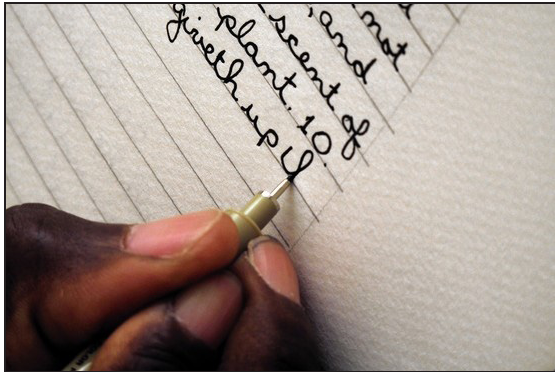


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# His Biblical Journey Is Letter by Letter

By REBECCA ROTHBAUM

Phillip Patterson has spent the last four years laboring on a project more associated with medieval monks than this era of 140-character bleats: He is transcribing the King James Bible by hand, all 921,820 words of it.



Laura Glazer  
Phillip Patterson is transcribing the King James Bible by hand.

Working on sheets of oversize ivory paper, writing in a careful cursive traced in black ink, the 61-year-old scribe is about three-quarters of the way to the final verse, Revelation 22:21: “The grace of our lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.”

The going has been steady but slow. Mr. Patterson has AIDS and a host of related illnesses that keep him shuttling between doctors’ offices and hospitals. Some days, he works from his bed at a makeshift drafting board inside his Philmont, N.Y., home, two deeply worn Bibles and a magnifying glass at his side.

“I sit and write and my mind expands and expands and expands,” he said. “You can’t work with this material without having your mind expanded and twisted in a million ways....All the medical stuff just can’t touch that.”

The King James Bible, named for the English monarch who commissioned it, turned 400 years old this year. It was long the most widely read Bible in the English-speaking world—and the best-selling version in the U.S.—until it was surpassed by the New International Version in the mid-1980s. The archaic language and high style of the King James text has shaped the language of the pulpit and influenced generations of writers, including Herman Melville and William Faulkner.



Laura Glazer  
Phillip Patterson sometimes works from two copies of the Bible.

Bruce Gordon, a professor of ecclesiastical history at Yale Divinity School, said he was not aware of anyone else having written out the entire book. Mr. Gordon said Christianity has no devotional tradition of copying the Bible by hand, with the exception of medieval monks who copied manuscripts as a spiritual act.

Intellectual curiosity rather than religious fervor led Mr. Patterson to the project. His partner of 20 years, who died of a liver disorder in February 2010, was a Muslim who collected handwritten Korans. He suggested that Mr. Patterson transcribe the Bible, and the concept instantly appealed.

“I like epics,” said Mr. Patterson, a retired interior designer and artist. “I like them in my life, and in my work.”

Although he attended Catholic school as a boy in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, Mr. Patterson had never read the Bible in its entirety, a fact that nagged at him. To write the text by hand, he knew he would finally have to read it.

When in good health, he works at least 10 hours a day on his project, stopping only to eat. Toggling between two different editions, he uses a ruler to trace lines across the page in pencil. Then he painstakingly copies the text with archival-quality ink onto 9-by-13-inch watercolor paper. Later, he carefully erases the pencil marks.

Mr. Patterson has grouped the 80 books that make up the complete King James text into what will be eight volumes; so far he has finished six, or about 1,663 pages. He has also done much of the binding work himself, but recently put that on hold to finish the writing.

“I’m in a health race here,” he said. “Someone else can always finish the binding.”

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Mr. Patterson's patient labors have inspired another artistic undertaking.

Laura Glazer, an Albany-based photographer, has documented his efforts since 2009, creating painterly portraits of him at work and still-life photographs of his materials.

Ms. Glazer, 34, has also been blogging the process. Her website combines her photographs and Mr. Patterson's updates on the project, which he publishes in his church newsletter.

Together, the pair has produced a reproduction of his hand-copied Book of Ruth with one of Ms. Glazer's portraits on the cover, which they sell on the crafts website Etsy.com. They have also exhibited their work in galleries and churches in the Hudson Valley.

Ms. Glazer said her fondness for handmade objects drew her to Mr. Patterson's transcription. She called the quality of the work "alive," and said the scribe has had a great impact on her. "He just knows how to do life," she said.

Mr. Patterson said he hopes to finish the project in 2012 and plans to donate all the volumes to his church, St. Peter's Presbyterian in Spencertown, N.Y. The pastor there, Drew Paton, said the project had already "helped people look at the text with new eyes."

"After services," he said, "there's always a contingency that's really eager to talk about the text."

Medical setbacks have forced Mr. Patterson to take off weeks at a time, but he is resolved to finish the project, which he credits for giving him energy through his illness—even if it has not resolved his questions about God.

"Even though I may have gone through the whole book," he said, "I know nothing."

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