

Congress and the Bible

Myths regarding the printing, financing, distribution, or recommending of Bibles by our early Congresses are among the most popular of all the religious right American history lies. Most are variations of the same three stories – two involving the Continental Congress, and one an act signed by James Madison.

The first is the story of the Continental Congress importing Bibles in 1777.

According to William Federer, in his book *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations*: “Continental Congress September 11, 1777, approved and recommended to the people that 20,000 copies of The Holy Bible be imported from other sources. This was in response to the shortage of Bibles in America caused by the Revolutionary War interrupting trade with England. The Chaplain of Congress, Patrick Allison, brought the matter to the attention of Congress, who assigned it to a special Congressional Committee, which reported:

That the use of the Bible is so universal and its importance so great that your committee refers the above to the consideration of Congress, and if Congress shall not think it

expedient to order the importation of types and paper, the Committee recommends that Congress will order the Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere, into the different parts of the States in the Union.

Whereupon it was resolved accordingly to direct said Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 copies of the Bible.”

While most versions of this story are similar to William Federer’s, some authors turn it into a completely different story.

According to Tim LaHaye, in his book *Faith of Our Founding Fathers*: “The Bible, the greatest book ever written, is indispensable to Christianity. That fact was clear in the very first act of Congress, authorizing the printing of twenty thousand Bibles for the Indians.”

It also appears in various lists of lies circulated by email, and eventually copied onto hundreds of websites.

From *History Forgotten*, the most widely circulated of the internet lists: “Did you know that 52 of the 55 signers of the Declaration of Independence were orthodox, deeply committed, Christians? The other three all believed in the Bible as the divine truth, the God of Scripture, and His personal intervention. It is the same Congress that formed the American Bible Society.¹ Immediately after creating the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress voted to pur-

1. The American Bible Society, which did not exist until 1816, was not formed by the Continental or any later Congress, nor did it have Thomas Jefferson as its first chairman, an addition made to the *History Forgotten* list as it was circulated. It should be noted that a handful of those copying the list have corrected one of its many inaccuracies, changing “55 signers of the Declaration of Independence” to the correct number, fifty-six. Apparently, there are a few Liars for Jesus out there who find it important to be accurate about the number of people they are lying about.

chase and import 20,000 copies of Scripture for the people of this nation.”

William Federer’s version of the 1777 Bible story is typical of those found in the majority of religious right American history books. It tells half of the real story, includes a quote from an actual committee report, but ends with a fabricated resolution. The resolution is created to change the outcome of the story from Congress dropping the matter, which is what really happened, to Congress proceeding to import the Bibles. Tim LaHaye’s version, that Congress printed Bibles for the Indians, has absolutely no basis in fact. But, as drastically different as their stories are, both Federer and LaHaye cite the same pages from the *Journals of the Continental Congress* as their source.

In addition to changing the outcome of the story, none of the religious right American history books fully explain why Congress was considering importing the Bibles in the first place. Most mention that the war with England caused a shortage of Bibles, which is true, but this is only half the story. Congress’s consideration of the matter had to do with the prevention of price gouging.

Not all Americans during the Revolutionary War were the virtuous, Christian citizens portrayed in the religious right version of American history. Many were taking advantage of war shortages and charging outrageous prices for just about anything they could get their hands on. No product was safe – not even Bibles. The widespread problem of price gouging prompted numerous attempts by individual states, groups of states, and Congress to regulate prices, none of which were very successful. With less than half the country in favor of the war to begin with, Congress was very concerned with minimizing hardships like high prices and shortages of items previously imported from England.

In 1777, three ministers from Philadelphia, Francis Alison, John Ewing, and William Marshall, came up with a plan to alleviate the Bible shortage. Their idea was to import the necessary type and paper, and print an edition in Philadelphia. The problem with this plan, however, was that, if the project was financed and controlled by private companies, the Bibles would most likely be bought up and resold at prices that the average American couldn’t afford.

Rev. Alison wrote a memorial to Congress, explaining the dilem-

ma and asking for help. What the ministers wanted Congress to do was finance the printing, as a loan to be repaid by the sale of the Bibles. As Rev. Alison explained in the memorial, if Congress imported the type and paper, and Congress contracted the printer, then Congress could regulate the selling price of the Bibles.

We therefore think it our duty to our country and to the churches of Christ to lay this danger before this honourable house, humbly requesting that under your care, and by your encouragement, a copy of the holy Bible may be printed, so as to be sold nearly as cheap as the common Bibles, formerly imported from Britain and Ireland, were sold.

The number of purchasers is so great, that we doubt not but a large impression would soon be sold, But unless the sale of the whole edition belong to the printer, and he be bound under sufficient penalties, that no copy be sold by him, nor by any retailer under him, at a higher price than that allowed by this honourable house, we fear that the whole impression would soon be bought up, and sold again at an exorbitant price, which would frustrate your pious endeavours and fill the country with just complaints.²

Rev. Alison's memorial was referred to a committee, who concluded that it would be too costly to import the type and paper, and too risky to import them into Philadelphia, a city likely to be invaded by the British. The committee proposed the less risky alternative of importing already printed Bibles into different ports from a country other than England. If Congress did this, they would still be able to regulate the selling price, and would still be reimbursed by the sales. The report of this committee is cited by every religious right American history author as their source, whatever their version of this story, including Tim LaHaye, with his tale of Congress printing the Bibles for the Indians.

The committee's report is misquoted in various ways. Usually omitted is anything indicating that importing the Bibles was proposed

2. *Papers of the Continental Congress*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M247, r53, i42, v1, p35.

as an alternative to Rev. Alison's original request that Congress import the type and paper. Always omitted is that what Congress was considering was only a loan. With these omissions, no real explanation for Congress's involvement is necessary. The committee's report appears to fit the story that the ministers simply alerted Congress to the shortage of Bibles, and Congress considered this to be such a serious problem that they immediately imported some.

In his book *Original Intent*, David Barton quotes only the following pieces of one sentence from the committee's report:

"[T]hat the use of the Bible is so universal and its importance so great...your committee recommend that Congress will order the Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere, into the different ports of the States in the Union."

The following is the entire report, as it appears in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*.

The committee appointed to consider the memorial of the Rev. Dr. Allison and others, report, "That they have conferred fully with the printers, &c. in this city, and are of opinion, that the proper types for printing the Bible are not to be had in this country, and that the paper cannot be procured, but with such difficulties and subject to such casualties, as render any dependence on it altogether improper: that to import types for the purpose of setting up an entire edition of the bible, and to strike off 30,000 copies, with paper, binding, &c. will cost £10,272 10, which must be advanced by Congress, to be reimbursed by the sale of the books:"

"That, your committee are of opinion, considerable difficulties will attend the procuring the types and paper; that, afterwards, the risque of importing them will considerably enhance the

cost, and that the calculations are subject to such uncertainty in the present state of affairs, that Congress cannot much rely on them: that the use of the Bible is so universal, and its importance so great, that your committee refer the above to the consideration of Congress, and if Congress shall not think it expedient to order the importation of types and paper, your committee recommend that Congress will order the Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere, into the different ports of the states in the Union.”³

Prior to considering the alternative of importing Bibles, the committee did two things. They had several Philadelphia printers submit quotes for printing the Bibles, and drafted a list of fifteen proposed regulations for their printing. The third through the seventh of these regulations dealt with the arrangement to be made between Congress and the printer, and clearly show that Congress intended to be reimbursed, and that the goal of the plan was to regulate the selling price of the Bibles.

3. That as there are not Types in America to answer this Purpose, there should be a compleat Font, sufficient for setting the whole Bible at once, imported by Congress at the Public Expence, to be refunded in a stipulated Time by the Printer.

4. That in Order to prevent the Paper Makers from demanding an extravagant Price for the Paper, and retarding the Work by Breach of Contract or otherwise there should also be imported with the Types a few Reams of Paper, not exceeding a thousand, at the Beginning of the Work, to be paid for by the Printer in y^e same Manner as y^e Types are to be paid for.

5. That a Printer be employed, who shall undertake the Work at his own Risque & Expence, giving a Mortgage on y^e Font

3. Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), 733-734.

& Printing Materials, with sufficient Personal Securities for his Fidelity, until the first Cost of y^e Font, y^e Paper, & such Sums of Money as the Congress may think proper to advance to him for Dispatch of the Work, be refunded to the Public.

6. That in Order to render the Price of Binding as low as possible, the Congress order their Commissary General for Hides etc to deliver to the Printer at a moderate Price all the Sheep Skins furnished at y^e Camp, to be tanned for this Purpose.

7. That the Printer be bound under sufficient Penalties to furnish Bibles to y^e Public at a limited Price, not exceeding ten Shillings each, & to prevent any Retailer, under him in the United States from asking an higher price on any Pretence whatsoever.⁴

What appears in the *Journals of the Continental Congress* after the committee's report is the following motion.

Whereupon, the Congress was moved, to order the Committee of Commerce to import twenty thousand copies of the Bible.⁵

The problem for the religious right authors who claim that the Bibles were imported is that, although this motion passed, it was not a final vote to import the Bibles. It was a merely a vote on replacing the original plan of importing the type and paper with the committee's proposal of importing already printed Bibles. In other words, they were only voting on what they were going to be voting on. The vote on the motion was close – seven states voted yes; six voted no. A second motion was then made to pass a resolution to import the Bibles, but this was postponed and never brought up again. No Bibles were imported. This little problem is solved in the religious right history

4. *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 3, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1950-1951), 275-276.

5. Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), 734.

books by either rewording the motion to turn it into a resolution, or omitting the motion altogether and ending the story with some statement implying that the Bibles were imported.

In William Federer's version, the motion is reworded: "Whereupon it was resolved accordingly to direct said Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 copies of the Bible."

David Barton ends his version of the story with the following statement: "Congress agreed and ordered the Bibles imported."

The *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic Exhibit* on the Library of Congress website presents this story in as misleading a manner as Federer or Barton, also giving the impression that the Bibles were imported. It is only in the companion book to the exhibit, published at the time of the physical exhibit at the Library in 1998, that James H. Hutson, Chief of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress, and curator of the exhibit, bothers to mention that the Bibles were never imported. Of course, far more people will visit the exhibit on the website than will ever see the book, which is no longer even available.

The following is all that appears on the Library of Congress website version of the exhibit: "The war with Britain cut off the supply of Bibles to the United States with the result that on Sept. 11, 1777, Congress instructed its Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 Bibles from "Scotland, Holland or elsewhere."

This is what appears in the companion book: "An unfailing antidote to immorality was Bible reading. Hostilities, however, had interrupted the supply of Bibles from Great Britain, raising fears of a shortage of Scripture just when it was needed most. in the summer of 1777, three Presbyterian ministers warned Congress of this danger and urged it to arrange for a

domestic printing of the Bible. Upon investigation, a committee of Congress discovered that it would be cheaper to import Bibles from continental Europe and made such a recommendation to the full Congress on September 11, 1777. Congress approved the recommendation on the same day, instructing its Committee of Commerce to import twenty thousand Bibles from ‘Scotland, Holland or elsewhere’ but adjourned—the British were poised to take Philadelphia—without passing implementing legislation.”

The problem with using the approach of the British as the reason that Congress never got around to the Bible resolution is that this was postponed a week before Congress knew the invasion of Philadelphia was imminent. The letters of the delegates from this week clearly show that they were cautiously optimistic. They heard that Howe’s army had sustained three times the casualties of Washington’s troops in the Battle of Brandywine, and that two days later the British were still at the battlefield dealing with their wounded, a delay that might allow reinforcements to arrive from New Jersey in time to prevent Howe from reaching Philadelphia.

On September 11, the day of the battle, and also the day the Bible motion was voted on, the resolution was postponed until September 13. On September 13, the Congress was still in Philadelphia, and determined to stay there. It wasn’t until the evening of September 18 that they received the letter from Washington’s aide, Alexander Hamilton, advising them to leave. Other than deciding on September 14 that, if it did become necessary to evacuate, they would reassemble in Lancaster, it was business as usual in Philadelphia until the receipt of Hamilton’s letter.

Hutson’s claim that the Bible resolution was dropped because of the British is an easy one to get away with because of the language used at the time to designate an upcoming day. When the Continental Congress, on a Thursday, postponed something until “*Saturday next*,” they meant in two days, not a week from Saturday. The Bible resolution was only postponed from Thursday, September 11 to Saturday, September 13. It was not postponed until September 20, the Saturday that would fit Hutson’s story.

The British approaching excuse also makes no sense for a few other reasons. The first is that the whole point of changing the plan from printing Bibles in Philadelphia to importing Bibles into other ports was that Philadelphia was likely to be invaded. Congress didn't just permanently drop other business, even after they actually did move, so why didn't they just vote to import the Bibles into these other ports after they moved? The second is that Congress never took up the issue at any later date. The Bible shortage still existed – a year later, two years later – yet, the issue of Bibles didn't even come up again until over three years later, when James McLene, a delegate from Pennsylvania, proposed a resolution to regulate the printing of Bibles in the individual states.

According to James H. Hutson, in the *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* companion book: “The issue of the Bible supply was raised again in Congress in 1780 when it was moved that the states be requested ‘to procure one or more new and correct editions of the old and new testament to be published.’”

The following was McLene's entire resolution.

Resolved, That it be recommended to such of the States who may think it convenient for them that they take proper measures to procure one or more new and correct editions of the old and new testament to be printed and that such states regulate their printers by law so as to secure effectually the said books from being misprinted.⁶

The timing of McLene's proposal makes it next to impossible that it wasn't prompted by the fact that Philadelphia printer Robert Aitken had begun work on an edition of the Bible. But, it wouldn't have been Aitken's edition that McLene feared would be misprinted. Aitken was a reputable printer who had not only been the official printer to Congress until 1779, but had already printed several good editions of the New Testament. The potential problem was that, if Aitken's Bibles

6. Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 18, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 979.

sold well, any number of not so reputable and less skilled printers would try to get a piece of the action by rushing to produce their own editions, with little regard to their accuracy. There is also a pretty good chance that McLene, along with John Hanson, who seconded McLene's motion, wanted to give their friend Robert Aitken an edge in the Bible printing business by making it more difficult for anyone else to print a competing edition.

What's interesting about McLene's resolution, however, isn't why he proposed it, but its unusual wording. This wording may actually provide the explanation for the unexplained disappearance of the 1777 Bible resolution. Resolutions of the Continental Congress were almost always addressed to *all* of the states. The only exceptions to this were resolutions that for some reason wouldn't apply to all of the states, such as a request to supply the army with a commodity that was only produced in certain states. In these cases, the states that the resolution applied to were listed by name. Resolutions were never addressed only to the states that might "*think it convenient.*" This odd wording, as well as Congress dropping the plan to import Bibles three years earlier, may have resulted from a question of states' rights, specifically the freedom of the press.

When the committee on the memorial of Rev. Alison drafted their proposed regulations for printing Bibles in 1777, they included the following two regulations designed to eliminate competition and ensure that the printer would sell enough of the Bibles to reimburse Congress.

14. That the Printer employed in the Work devote himself to this Business alone; & that no other Printer in the united States be suffered to interfere with him in the Printing of that Form or Kind of a Bible, which he has undertaken.

15. That after the Bible is published, no more Bibles of that Kind be imported into the American States by any Person whatsoever.⁷

In 1777, when Congress was considering the Bible supply problem, they were also in the middle of writing the Articles of Confederation.

7. *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 3, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1950-1951), 276.

At this time, the question of how much authority Congress should have over the states would certainly have been on the minds of all the delegates. Most of them would have seen any regulation giving Congress any power over the freedom of the press in their states as setting a dangerous precedent. Regulation number fourteen, prohibiting any printer in America from printing a similar edition of the Bible, would make Congress no better than the British government, which prohibited the printing of the Bible without a government license.

Because the proposed regulations were for the printing of Bibles, but the motion was to import them, it's pretty likely that these regulations were simply disregarded until it occurred to someone that even if the Bibles were imported, the regulations to ensure their sale would still be necessary. This could easily have happened at some point in the two days following the vote on the motion. If even one of the seven states that voted in favor of the motion decided that the freedom of the press was more important than importing Bibles, and made it known that they were going to vote the other way on the resolution, there would have been little point in proceeding.

The only logical explanation for McLene limiting his 1780 resolution to the states that might "*think it convenient*" is that he already knew a resolution suggesting that any state whose constitution guaranteed freedom of the press should pass a law infringing on this right wouldn't stand a chance, and the only time that such a suggestion had been made prior to this was in the regulations proposed in 1777.

The second of the top three myths about Congress and the Bible involves the edition of the Bible begun by Robert Aitken in 1780, and completed in 1782.

According to William Federer, in his book *America's God and Country*: "Robert Aitken (1734-1802), on January 21, 1781, as publisher of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, petitioned Congress for permission to print Bibles, since there was a shortage of Bibles in America due to the Revolutionary War interrupting trade with England. The Continental Congress, September 10, 1782, in response to the shortage of Bibles, approved and recommended to the people that *The Holy Bible* be printed by Robert Aitken of

Philadelphia. This first American Bible was to be ‘a neat edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools’:

Whereupon, Resolved, That the United States in Congress assembled...recommend this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States, and hereby authorize [Robert Aitken] to publish this recommendation in any manner he shall think proper.”

Elsewhere in the same book, Federer includes a second version of the story, in which Aitken was “*contracted*” by Congress to print his Bibles.

According to Federer: “Congress of the Confederation September 10, 1782, in response to the need for Bibles which again arose, granted approval to print ‘a neat edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools.’ The printing was contracted to Robert Aitken of Philadelphia, a bookseller and publisher of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, who had previously petitioned Congress on January 21, 1781.”

There are many versions of this story floating around, all worded to mislead that Congress either requested the printing of the Bibles, granted Aitken permission to print them, contracted him to print them, paid for the printing, or had Bibles printed for the use of schools. Congress did none of these things. All they did was grant one of several requests made by Aitken by having their chaplains examine his work, and allowing him to publish their resolution stating that, based on the chaplains’ report, they were satisfied that his edition was accurate. The words “*a neat edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools*” are taken from a letter written by Aitken,⁸ not the resolution of Congress.

The actual resolution is edited in various ways. The purpose of

8. *Papers of the Continental Congress*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M247, r48, i41, v1, p63.

this editing is to omit that Congress also had a secular reason for recommending Aitken's Bible, and, in most cases, to turn the resolution into a recommendation of the Bible itself, rather than a recommendation of the accuracy of Aitken's work.

This is the typical, and often copied, version of the resolution that appears on James H. Hutson's religion exhibit on the Library of Congress website: "Congress 'highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the interest of religion...in this country, and...they recommend this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States.'"

The following is the entire resolution.

Whereupon, Resolved, That the United States in Congress assembled, highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the interest of religion as well as an instance of the progress of arts in this country, and being satisfied from the above report, of his care and accuracy in the execution of the work, they recommend this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States, and hereby authorise him to publish this recommendation in the manner he shall think proper.⁹

Aitken actually asked Congress for quite a bit more than they gave him. In addition to his work being examined by the chaplains, Aitken requested that his Bible "*be published under the Authority of Congress,*"¹⁰ and that he "*be commissioned or otherwise appointed & Authorized to print and vend Editions of the Sacred Scriptures.*"¹¹ He also asked Congress to purchase some of his Bibles and distribute them to the states. Congress did not grant any of these other requests. The only help Aitken ever got from Congress was the resolution endors-

9. Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 23, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 574.

10. *Papers of the Continental Congress*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M247, r48, i41, v1, p63.

11. *ibid.*

ing the accuracy of his work.

The secular benefit of this resolution, omitted by Hutson and others, was that it acknowledged “*an instance of the progress of arts in this country.*” Publicizing the accuracy of this Bible was a great way for Congress to promote the American printing industry.

Few American printers at this time were printing books. Most limited their businesses to broadsides, pamphlets, and newspapers. The books that were printed in America were not only more expensive than those imported from England, but had a reputation for being full of errors. Congress knew that as soon as the war was over and books could once again be imported, any progress that the book shortage had caused in the printing industry would end. The war had created an opportunity for American printers to prove themselves, and Robert Aitken had done that. Printing an accurate edition of a book as large as the Bible was a monumental task for any printer, and Congress wanted it known that an American printer had accomplished it. But, by omitting the part of the resolution acknowledging this “*instance of the progress of arts,*” it is easily made to appear that Congress passed this resolution for the sole purpose of promoting religion.

In 1968, the American Bible Society published a reprint of the Aitken Bible. Appearing in the center of the title page of this reprint, in very large type, are the words “*As Printed by Robert Aitken and Approved & Recommended by the Congress of the United States of America in 1782.*” Although this page was added by the American Bible Society, it is quoted on many websites as the title page of the original. The first few pages of Aitken’s Bible contained the resolution of Congress, the letter from the committee to the chaplains requesting that they examine the edition for accuracy, and the report of the chaplains.

The following is the committee’s letter to the chaplains, as it appears in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*.

Rev. Gentlemen, Our knowledge of your piety and public spirit leads us without apology to recommend to your particular attention the edition of the holy scriptures publishing by Mr. Aitken. He undertook this expensive work at a time, when from the circumstances of the war, an English edition of the Bible could not be imported, nor any opinion formed

how long the obstruction might continue. On this account particularly he deserves applause and encouragement. We therefore wish you, reverend gentlemen, to examine the execution of the work, and if approved, to give it the sanction of your judgment, and the weight of your recommendation. We are with very great respect, your most obedient humble servants.¹²

The chaplains, Rev. Dr. White and Rev. Mr. Duffield, reported back to the committee:

Gentlemen, Agreeably to your desire, we have paid attention to Mr. Robert Aitken's impression of the holy scriptures, of the old and new testament. Having selected and examined a variety of passages throughout the work, we are of opinion, that it is executed with great accuracy as to the sense, and with as few grammatical and typographical errors as could be expected in an undertaking of such magnitude. Being ourselves witnesses of the demand for this invaluable book, we rejoice in the present prospect of a supply, hoping that it will prove as advantageous as it is honorable to the gentleman, who has exerted himself to furnish it at the evident risk of private fortune. We are, gentlemen, your very respectful and humble servants.¹³

On many Christian American history websites, and in a handful of books, the Aitken Bible is called "*The Bible of the Revolution*," implying that this was what the Bible was called at the time it was published. In reality, however, this title was invented much later, when individual Aitken Bible leaves were packaged for sale.

According to Mark Beliles and Stephen McDowell in their book *America's Providential History*: "In 1782, Congress acted the role of a Bible society by officially approving the printing and distribution of the 'Bible

12. Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 23, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 573.

13. *ibid.*

**of the Revolution,' an American translation prepared
by Robert Aitken."**

The Aitken Bible was first dubbed "*The Bible of the Revolution*" by Robert Dearden and Douglas Watson in 1930. Dearden and Watson, who were trying to sell over five hundred Aitken Bible leaves, had the leaves, along with facsimiles of various documents related to the Bible, made into books. The books were sold as *An Original Leaf from the Bible of the Revolution, and an Essay Concerning It By Robert R. Dearden, Jr. and Douglas S. Watson*. The essay written by Dearden and Watson for this book is one source of the versions of the lies used by today's religious right for both their 1777 and 1782 Bible stories.

Myths about the Aitken Bible have also been perpetuated by the antique book dealers now selling these Dearden and Watson leaves, or those from another copy dismembered in 1998 to create a similar collectible item, who describe Aitken's Bible as small enough to fit in the coat pocket of the soldiers, implying that this was the reason for its size. Some of these book dealers also list the other documents printed in the Dearden and Watson book, including what is often described as "*the text of George Washington's letter commending Robert Aitken for helping to meet the American soldiers' need for Bibles.*"

Washington did write a letter regarding the Bibles, but it was not a letter to commend Robert Aitken for helping to meet the American soldiers' need for Bibles. These Bibles never even ended up in the hands of the soldiers. Washington's letter was a reply to a letter from Aitken's friend Dr. John Rodgers, a Presbyterian minister who was trying to help Aitken sell his Bibles to Congress.

By the time Aitken finished his Bible, the war was winding down. He knew that if peace was declared, and trade with England resumed, he would be stuck with thousands of Bibles that he would never be able to sell. On September 9, 1782, three days before Congress passed their resolution, Aitken wrote the following to John Hanson, the President of Congress, requesting that Congress buy some of the Bibles.

It need not be suggested to the Wisdom of that Honourable
Body that the Monarchs of Europe have hitherto deemed the
Sacred Scriptures peculiarly worthy of the Royal Patronage,
nor that a Work of such magnitude must nearly crush an

individual unless assisted by exterior Aid in supporting so great a weight; nor will I presume to prescribe the Mode in which Such Aid may be afforded; but I beg leave to intimate, that as I apprehend my greatest risque arises from the Near Approach of Peace, my utmost wishes would be accomplished if Congress will purchase a proportion of the edition on Acc^t of the United States. One Fourth of it will not Amount to 200 Bibles for each State; And as I am anxious merely to *secure the sale* of the Books, it will not be inconsistent with my views to allow a Moderate Credit.¹⁴

As already mentioned, this request was denied. Eight months later, despite his anticipation of a great demand for Bibles in America, the recommendation of Congress, and no competition from imports, Aitken hadn't sold many Bibles. In April 1783, Congress officially declared the end of hostilities, and the army was beginning to disband. In May 1783, Aitken tried again to get Congress to buy his Bibles – this time to give as gifts to the soldiers being discharged. Aitken knew that Congress would deny the request if he made it himself, so he had a minister friend, Dr. John Rodgers, write to George Washington suggesting not only that Congress buy the Bibles for the soldiers, but that Washington propose the idea as if it was his own. Congress, of course, would be extremely unlikely to deny a request that came from George Washington. The following is from Dr. Rodgers's letter.

There is another Subject I beg Leave to mention to your Excellency, & that is the case of a worthy citizen of these states, Mr. Robert Aitkin, who has published an Edition of the Bible in our Language; and which was undertaken at a Time when that sacred book was very scarce & the Inhabitants of these States in great Want of it—but the peculiar difficulty & expence attending a Work of such Magnitude in the then State of our Country delayed it's Completion till the Approach of Peace; and British Bibles being imported much cheaper than he can afford to sell His, He is like to be ruined by His generous Effort in behalf of our Divine Religion—Painful

14. *Papers of the Continental Congress*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M247, r90, i78, v1, p421.

Thought, and not very honorable is this rising Empire, that the first Man who undertook to print the holy Scriptures in our language in America, Should be beggared by it.

What I would take the Liberty to suggest to your Excellency, is the presenting each Soldier, & Non Commissioned Officer in the American Army, with a Copy of this Bible, by Congress, on their being disbanded. This would serve not only to save a deserving Citizen from Ruin who highly Merits Attention; but would serve to furnish those brave Men to whom America is so greatly indebted for their Liberties, in the Hand of Heaven with a sure Guide to eternal Life, if they will but take heed to it.

Such are the Obligations that your Country, & Congress as their grand representation, are under to your Excellency, and such is just Sense they have of these obligations, that a Line from your Excellency to Congress on the Subject, and I would wish it as a *** Motion of your own, would probably have the desired Effect — I take a Liberty — to suggest the Thought, and your Excellency will make such Use of it as your Prudence shall dictate.¹⁵

The following was Washington's reply.

Your proposition concerning Mr. Aikin's Bibles would have been particularly noted by me, had it been suggested in season, but the late Resolution of Congress for discharging part of the Army, taking off near two thirds of our numbers, it is now too late to make the attempt. It would have pleased me well, if Congress had been pleased to make such an important present to the brave fellows, who have done so much for the security of their Country's rights and establishment.¹⁶

This letter was nothing more than a polite reply to Dr. Rodgers. It

15. John Rodgers to George Washington, May 30, 1783, *George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4, General Correspondence*.

16. George Washington to John Rodgers, June 11, 1783, *ibid*.

is highly unlikely that Washington would have asked Congress to buy the Bibles, even if the idea had been proposed earlier. Most of the soldiers being discharged were owed months, or even years, of back pay and Congress was deeply in debt. There was dissent among the officers who knew that Congress didn't have the money to pay their promised pensions. This problem was so bad that a group of politicians was able to instigate the Newburgh Conspiracy. With the goal of raising money to pay the country's debts, these politicians hatched a plot to scare the American people into allowing Congress to impose taxes on them, a power that it didn't have under the Articles of Confederation. A few anonymous addresses was all it took to get some of Washington's officers to go along and cook up what would look like a threat of an armed takeover of the government by the disgruntled army. Washington had just managed to put a stop to this a few months before receiving Dr. Rodgers's letter. In another incident not long after this, a mob of armed soldiers marched into Philadelphia demanding to be paid. These soldiers surrounded the State House, forcing the Congress to move to Princeton. It's a pretty safe bet that Washington would have been far more concerned with paying the soldiers than giving them Bibles.

Aitken ended up losing over £3,000 on the 10,000 Bibles he printed. Few stories about the Aitken Bible mention that it sold poorly, and those that do blame it on the competition of cheaper British Bibles. The problem with this theory is that Aitken completed his Bible seven months before the end of hostilities was declared by Congress, and over a year before the peace treaty with Great Britain was ratified. According to the treaty, American ports would not be open to British ships until all British troops were removed, which was clearly going to take a while, so the possibility of a supply of imported Bibles was still uncertain even at this point.

In 1777, Rev. Alison had written to Congress that the "*number of purchasers is so great, that we doubt not but a large impression would soon be sold.*" Obviously, Rev. Alison greatly overestimated the demand for Bibles because, in 1782, after five more years without a supply, Robert Aitken couldn't sell his.

In 1790, Aitken wrote to George Washington, using his losses from printing his Bibles as one of the reasons that Washington should help him get the job of Printer and Stationer to Congress. In this letter,

Aitken not only exaggerated the involvement of Congress in his 1782 printing, but hinted that he was still looking for government help to print Bibles. Aitken claimed in this letter that “*the scarcity of that valuable book was such, as to claim the attention of Congress, and excite their solicitude for a supply*” and “*that the Book was undertaken in a great measure at the instance, and under the Patronage of Congress.*” Congress never solicited a supply of Bibles, nor did Aitken undertake his printing in any way at their instance. The Papers and Journals of the Continental Congress clearly show this was all initiated by Aitken himself.

The following is from Aitken’s 1790 letter to George Washington. Washington, who did not know Aitken personally, did not answer this letter personally. He had his secretary, Tobias Lear, inform Aitken that he should apply to Congress if he wanted to be the printer to Congress.

I doubt not Your Excellency recollects, that I printed an Edition of the Bible, at a time when the scarcity of that valuable book was such, as to claim the attention of Congress, and excite their solicitude for a supply; It was done under the inspection of a Committee of that Honorable Body, though at my sole expence, and the work was highly approved and recommended to the inhabitants of the United States — “by the Act of Congress of September 12th 1782.” The peace which took place soon after, removed the obstructions to importation, and so glutted the market with Bibles that I was obliged to sell mine much below prime cost; and in the End, I actually sunk above £3000 by the impression. These two circumstances render my losses exceedingly heavy, and indeed, almost unsupportable: But, Sir, I flatter myself I may hope for some compensation, in a small share of Public Favour; especially when it is considered, that the Book was undertaken in a great measure at the instance, and under the Patronage of Congress — Under this impression, together with the perfect conviction of Your Excellency’s benevolence; and your sympathy with all the virtuous feelings of Human Nature; I humbly trust that you will be pleased to have me appointed Printer & Stationer to Congress; or in any other way in which I might be of Public Service, in the

line of my business. I had it in Contemplation, to Petition your Excellency for an exclusive right, for a term of Years, to print the Bible within the United States, conceiving that my Sufferings, in consequence of my former Undertaking would entitle me to a preference: But a faithful execution of this Work would require, in Order to carry it on with propriety and good effect, such large sums of money, as I am utterly incapable of commanding; and therefore, however pleasing an employment it would be to me, while I live, I am constrained to relinquish former intentions in this respect, for want of the Means to carry them into effect.¹⁷

In his book *America's Christian History: The Untold Story*, Gary DeMar uses another popular approach to the 1777 and 1782 Bible stories. He manufactures a connection between the failure of Congress to import Bibles in 1777 and the printing of the Aitken Bible, making it appear that Aitken's Bible was somehow printed in place of the Bibles that weren't imported five years earlier.

In a section of his book titled "*The Congressional Bible*," DeMar begins the 1777 story with the typical lie, claiming that "*Congress issued an official resolution instructing the Committee on Commerce to import 20,000 copies of the Bible*," but truthfully states that the Bibles were never actually imported. He then explains the failure to import Bibles by implying that Congress, as a substitute for the Bibles that weren't imported, had something to do with the printing of Aitken's New Testaments, the first of which was published in 1777.

According to DeMar: "Even though the resolution passed, action was never taken to import the Bibles. Instead, Congress began to put emphasis on the printing of Bibles within the United States. In 1777 Robert Aitken of Philadelphia published a New Testament. Three additional editions were published in 1789, 1779, and 1781. The edition of 1779 was used in schools. Aitken's efforts proved so popular that he announced his desire to publish the whole Bible; he

17. Robert Aitken to George Washington, June 9, 1790, *George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4, General Correspondence*.

then petitioned Congress for support. Congress adopted the following resolution in 1782...

Aitken did not print his 1777 edition of New Testament because Congress “*put emphasis on the printing of Bibles within the United States.*” There is no connection whatsoever between Congress not importing Bibles in 1777 and any edition of the Bible printed by Aitken.

In his book *Original Intent*, David Barton also tries to connect the two stories, but since Barton claims that Congress *did* import Bibles in 1777, his version is a little different. According to Barton, Congress was having Robert Aitken print Bibles so that they wouldn’t have to *continue* to import them. As already mentioned, Barton ends his version of the 1777 story with the statement “*Congress agreed and ordered the Bibles imported.*” A few pages later, he begins his version of the Aitken Bible story.

According to Barton: “As the war prolonged, the shortage of Bibles remained a problem. Consequently, Robert Aitken, publisher of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, petitioned Congress on January 21, 1781, for permission to print the Bibles on his presses here in America rather than import them.”

Barton goes on to claim: “On September 12, 1782, the full Congress approved that Bible, which soon began rolling off the presses.”

Obviously, Congress didn’t do anything “*rather than*” importing Bibles, because they weren’t importing any Bibles to begin with. Barton’s claim that Aitken asked for permission to print his Bible is, of course, untrue because he was already printing it when he petitioned Congress in January 1781, and it was nearly completed when the September 12, 1782 resolution was passed.

Barton ends his story with the following quote from what he refers to as “*an early historian.*”

“Who, in view of this fact, will call in question

the assertion that this is a Bible nation? Who will charge the government with indifference to religion, when the first Congress of the States assumed all the rights and performed all the duties of a Bible Society long before such an institution had an existence in the world!”

The quote is accurate. For this one, Barton misquotes the title of the book that the quote comes from. In his endnotes, he lists the book as *History of the American Society from its Organization to the Present Time*. The actual title is *History of the American **Bible** Society from its Organization to the Present Time*. Barton’s “early historian” is W.P. Strickland. That would be Reverend W.P. Strickland, a nineteenth century Liar for Jesus.

The following is a longer excerpt from Rev. Strickland’s book, which contains the 1849 versions of the 1777 and 1782 Bible stories.

The Congress of 1777 answered a memorial on the subject of Bible destitution in this country by appointing a committee to advise as to the printing an edition of thirty thousand Bibles. The population of the country then was only about three millions, and all the Bibles in the entire *world* at that period did not exceed four millions. Thus it will be seen that its circulation in this and all other countries at that time was exceedingly limited.

The report of the committee appointed by Congress forms one of the brightest epochs in the history of our country, and sheds a clear and steady light over every subsequent eventful period. The public recognition of God in that act was of infinitely greater importance in giving stability to the times, and securing the permanency of our institutions, than all the imposing and formidable array of legal enactments ever made for the establishment of religion.

The committee, finding it difficult to procure the necessary material, such as paper and types, recommended Congress “the use of the Bible being so universal, and its importance

so great—to direct the Committee on Commerce to import, at the *expense* of Congress, twenty thousand English Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere, into the different ports of the States of the Union.” The report was adopted, and the importation ordered.

In 1781, when, from the existence of the war, an English Bible could not be imported, and no opinion could be formed how long the obstruction might continue, the subject of printing the Bible was again presented to Congress, and it was, on motion, referred to a committee of three.

The committee, after giving the subject a careful investigation, recommended to Congress an edition printed by Robert Aitken, of Philadelphia; whereupon it was “*Resolved*, That the United States, in Congress assembled, highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the interests of religion; and being satisfied of the care and accuracy of the execution of the work, recommend this edition to the inhabitants of the United States.”

How interesting is such a history of the early circulation of the Bible in this country! What moral sublimity in the fact, as it stands imperishably recorded and filed in the national archives! Who, in view of this fact, will call in question the assertion that *this is a Bible nation*? Who will charge the government with indifference to religion, when the *first* Congress of the States assumed all the rights and performed all the duties of a *Bible Society long before such an institution had an existence in the world*! What a standing, withering rebuke this to ecclesiastico-political demagogues, who, imitating the example of a late minister of instruction for France, would expel the Bible from the schools of our land!¹⁸

The third of the top three religious right myths about Congress and the Bible is that our early Congresses passed acts that financial-

18. W.P. Strickland, *History of the American Bible Society from its Organization to the Present Time*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1849), 19-21.

ly aided Bible societies. The most popular example is an act signed by James Madison in 1813.

According to David Barton, in his book *Original Intent*: “...in 1812 [sic], President Madison signed a federal bill which economically aided a Bible Society in its goal of the mass distribution of the Bible.”

This act, entitled *An Act for the relief of the Bible Society of Philadelphia*,¹⁹ had absolutely nothing to do with aiding this society in its goal of distributing the Bible. It merely waived an import duty on one shipment of printing plates, determined by Congress to have been unfairly charged.

At the beginning of the War of 1812, an act was passed doubling all import duties to fund the war. The Bible Society of Philadelphia had ordered a shipment of printing plates from England in 1809. By the time their order reached England, their plates were manufactured, and the shipment arrived in America, it was 1812 and the new tariff schedule had gone into effect. Because this particular shipment was ordered three years before the war began, Congress granted the society’s request that it be taxed according to the pre-war tariff schedule. The following is the description of the Bible Society’s request from the Senate Journal.

Mr. Leib presented the memorial of the managers of the Bible Society of Philadelphia, stating that, to enable them to promote the object of the institution, the gratuitous distribution of the sacred Scriptures, they had ordered, in the year 1809, a set of stereotype plates from England, and praying that these plates may be exonerated from the additional duties since imposed on British manufactures; and the memorial was read.²⁰

Some versions of this story claim that three Bible Societies were

19. Richard Peters, ed., *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, vol. 6, (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 116.

20. *Journal of the Senate of the United States of America*, vol. 5, (Washington D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1821), 231.

aided financially by acts signed by James Madison. The other two were the Bible Societies of Baltimore and Massachusetts.

An Act for the relief of the Baltimore and Massachusetts Bible Societies, signed on April 20, 1816, was a single act granting the requests of both societies. The Massachusetts Society was granted a drawback, which is a refund of import duties paid on goods that are exported within a certain amount of time from the date they were imported. The following excerpt from the act shows that this society was subject to the same laws as any other merchant, and was required to furnish proof that the Bibles they exported had arrived in a foreign port.

And be it further enacted, That the Comptroller of the Treasury be, and he is hereby, authorized to direct a debenture to be issued to the Massachusetts Bible Society, for a drawback of duties upon an invoice of Bibles exported from the port of Boston, on board the brigantine Panther, in the year one thousand eight hundred and fifteen: *Provided, however*, That the said Society shall produce satisfactory evidence to the said comptroller, as the law directs, that the invoice aforesaid has been landed in some foreign port or place.²¹

The act does not indicate the specific reason for the remission of duties on a set of printing plates to the Baltimore Society, but, like all such acts, it was for an individual incident. Each of these acts was for one invoice, and specified the boat, year, port, and goods that the act applied to. They were just like any of the many similar acts passed for all types of merchants for a variety of reasons. They were not general laws enacted to permanently aid any religious organization.

When Congress was petitioned to enact a general law exempting Bible societies from import duties, the request was denied. In April 1816, the same month that *An Act for the relief of the Baltimore and Massachusetts Bible Societies* was passed, a memorial from the Philadelphia Bible Society was rejected.²² This memorial requested that all Bible societies be exempt from import duties on all Bibles. The

21. Richard Peters, ed., *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, vol. 6, (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 162.

22. *The Debates and Proceedings of the Congress of the United States of America*, vol. 29, 14th Cong., 1st Sess., (Washington D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1854), 298.

Committee on Finance, to whom this memorial was referred, reported to the Senate that the request should not be granted because it would be unfair to other Bible importers, and would deter American printers from printing Bibles because they would be unable to sell them as cheaply as the Bible societies.²³

As a “Plan B,” the Philadelphia Bible Society, which apparently anticipated that the Senate would reject this petition, presented another, less extensive petition to the House of Representatives at the same time. This one made it through Congress, but the bill was not signed by Madison, as will be explained in Chapter Nine.

According to Chief Justice Burger, delivering the opinion of the court, *Walz v. Tax Commission of the City of New York*, 1970: “As early as 1813 the 12th Congress refunded import duties paid by religious societies on the importation of religious articles.”

The following was Burger’s footnote for this: “See 6 Stat. 116 (1813), relating to plates for printing Bibles. See also 6 Stat. 346 (1826) relating to church vestments, furniture, and paintings; 6 Stat. 162 (1816), Bible plates; 6 Stat. 600 (1834), and 6 Stat. 675 (1836), church bells.”

The 1813 and 1816 acts in Chief Justice Burger’s footnote are, of course, the acts for the Philadelphia, and Baltimore and Massachusetts Bible Societies.

The 1826 act relating to church vestments, furniture, and paintings was one of a number of acts for the relief of Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget of Kentucky. Bishop Flaget had a big problem on his hands in the 1820s. Wealthy people in Italy and France, including the King of France, wouldn’t stop sending him stuff. Flaget was founding a college and many Catholics in Europe wanted to help him. In 1824, they began sending him all sorts of expensive items. Most of these donations consisted of furniture, paintings, and equipment for the college. Some included items for Flaget’s church and residence. The

23. Walter Lowrie and Walter S. Franklin, eds., *American State Papers: Finance*, vol. 3, (Washington D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1834), 115.

problem was that Flaget couldn't afford to pay the import duties on these donations, and neither he nor Congress wanted to offend the donors, particularly the King of France, by not accepting them. In 1826, a year and a half after referring Flaget's first memorial to the Ways and Means Committee, Congress decided to waive the duties on the items that were then sitting at the New York customs house. Donations continued to arrive, so several more acts were passed over the next six years. When the objection was raised in 1832 that it was unfair to allow this only for Flaget, Congress started allowing other churches to receive similar donations from Europe duty-free. The justification for this was that the import duties on these items were protective tariffs, the purpose of which are to make imports more expensive to protect American manufacturers. Because the items received by churches as donations were not items that the churches were likely to buy for themselves if they didn't happen to receive them as donations, charging an import duty on them wasn't protecting anything.

The 1834 act regarding church bells in Justice Burger's footnote was for church bells received as a donation from Europe.

The 1836 church bell act remitted the import duties on a set of bells because the bells weren't being imported. They had been sent to England by a church in Philadelphia to be repaired and were only being returned.

