

The new illuminated manuscript?

When I learned that white evangelical women are drawing and painting all over their Bibles, I was caught between judging and celebrating the phenomenon.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

April 5, 2017

In Review



Complete Guide to Bible Journaling

Creative Techniques to Express Your Faith

by Joanne Fink and Regina Yoder

Design Originals

I really wanted to dislike this book when I first heard about it. It's a technique book on Bible journaling with a yellow flag on the cover boasting "Bonus! 400+ stickers, tabs, & more!" The thought of people coloring and stickering the pages of their Bibles (and a publisher capitalizing on that trend) vaguely worried me as I recalled [Revelation 22:18](#). Further, I was annoyed by the fact that the contributors to this book are all women—as if the creative arts are delegated to the realm of womanly things in the white evangelical Christian world, where this book is solidly rooted.

But the book's increasing popularity over the seven weeks since its release convinced me to take a closer look. *Complete Guide to Bible Journaling* is a #1 best-seller in several categories on Amazon, including "[Ritual Religious Practices](#)," and "[Christian Rites & Ceremonies](#)." Even more astoundingly, it's currently ranked at #1034 in books: of *all the books, in every genre*, that are sold through Amazon, only 1033 of them are selling more copies than this one! By way of comparison, Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is currently at #62,252, and the Penguin edition of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is at #11,849. (To be fair to Niebuhr and Kierkegaard, their books aren't new releases—Amazon shoppers have already had plenty of years to get these volumes on their shelves.) But *Complete Guide to Bible Journaling* even outpaces Michael Eric Dyson's *Tears We Cannot Stop*, which is currently ranked at #1670.

As I dug into the phenomenon of Bible journaling, I was surprised to learn how widespread it is. [Journaling Bibles](#) are available in a [variety of versions](#)—KJV, NIV, and ESV seem to be the most commonly available—and with various sizes of margins (or even [blank interleaved pages](#)) to allow for writing and drawing. That's where this book comes in: it is, as the cover claims, a resource book aimed at inspiring and encouraging Bible-journaling Christians to engage with scripture in new, creative ways.

Stickers, stamp pads, tracing paper, and stencils—no medium or means is off the table. The book is filled with colorful examples of Bible pages that have been painted

over and Bible excerpts that have been rendered into frame-worthy art for use in churches and homes. Honest reflections by artists explain how Bible journaling and drawing is, for them, an act of worship and a means of study. “I am able to fall deeper into Jesus every time I open the pages, splash some paint, stamp a sentiment,” says Tai Bender. Christina Lowery explains how she meditates on the words while she paints over them with watercolors: “As I’m writing the Word, I focus on saying it to myself over and over as I copy it, writing it on my heart.” She doesn’t use the phrase *lectio divina*, but that’s exactly what she’s describing.

Reading the meditations in this book, I realized how narrow my initial response was. Coloring and stickering in the Bible is, for the women featured in this book, a form of deep devotion. It’s an act of love that enacts the Reformation impulse to get Bibles into the hands of the people. The Bible, as a material object, doesn’t need to be protected from human hands: in fact, it calls out to us to engage with it. If the popularity of this book encourages scores of people to open their Bibles and interact with the words on the page, God’s work is being done in the world. If the tradition of the [illuminated manuscript](#) is being democratized, as the success of this book seems to indicate, both art and faith are likely to come out ahead.

My concern that the phenomenon of Bible journaling is dominated by women fades somewhat when I take the long, historical view. My beloved [medieval glosses](#) were written solely by men, and I don’t discount them on that basis (although I do lament the patriarchy that precluded women from Biblical commentary in the medieval era and informs Christian theology and rituals even to this day). What I see in this book is a group of faithful white evangelical women who are excited to spread the word about how they creatively engage with scripture. The fact that this engagement is artistic doesn’t diminish its identity as a form of exegesis.

There might even be a bit of a feminist streak driving the phenomenon. The authors tell Shanna Noel’s story this way: “On one otherwise ordinary Sunday in 2014, Shanna opened her journaling Bible and, instead of writing a response to her pastor-husband’s sermon, sat down with it at her art desk and went to work with her art tools.” I celebrate that moment, which would eventually launch Shanna and her “pastor-husband” into a [new form of ministry](#) that just might make the gender scale more balanced in the history of exegesis.