



Gideon Checks Out

*Rocky Raccoon checked into his room
Only to find Gideon's Bible
Lennon & McCartney*

† THE FIRST THING THAT TRAVELLERS come across when they check into almost any hotel or motel room in America—once they’ve surveyed the bathroom and checked the status of the liquor cabinet—is a typically pristine copy of the *Holy Bible*, invariably taking its customary place in the top drawer of the nightstand by the bed.

The sight is so unremarkable that few guests ever bother to question how the book got there, much less ponder why it’s a Bible, as opposed to, say, a Koran, a Torah, or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It’s not simply because Bible is the most widely read book in the world, or because America is (however dubiously) regarded as a ‘Christian’ nation.

In fact, you can thank (or, depending on your religious inclination, blame it on) two Christian traveling salesmen—John Nicholson and Samuel Hill—who shared a hotel room in Boscobel, Wisconsin in 1898. (It isn’t known if the salesmen peddled bibles, books, bonnets, or bicycles, but the town of Boscobel bills itself as the ‘Wild Turkey Hunting Capital of Wisconsin,’ so perhaps they were selling buckshot.)

In any case, despairing of the lack of any suitable Christian reading material in the hotel lobby or guest rooms, the devout pair decided to form an association to rectify the oversight. Meeting the following year with a third man named Will Knights at a YMCA in Janesville, the group founded *The Gideons*, taking their name from the figure of Gideon featured in the Bible’s *Judges 6*.

In the biblical parable, the ‘Angel of the Lord’—appearing in the form of a traveller setting down for a brief respite—enters into a conversation with Gideon. God, speaking through the angel, instructs Gideon to assemble an Israelite army to subdue the oppressive forces of the Mideans. Gideon asks for proof of God’s will through the performance of three miracles, and upon their fulfillment he and 300 men frighten away the Midean army at night with torches and trumpets, tricking them into thinking they are facing an infantry of thousands.

What all this has to do with handing out free bibles is a bit unclear, but nonetheless, in 1908 *The Gideons* began offering to furnish every single room of any newly-opening hotel with a complimentary copy.

By the 1920s, the name *Gideons* had become synonymous with free bible distribution, and by the opening years of the 21st century, a bible could be found in almost 95% of the hotels in the country, as well as in many waiting rooms, schools, colleges, jails, and prisons. (*Gideon Bibles* are bound in color-coded covers, including white for medical offices and a convenient ‘desert camouflage’ for the military.)

Gideons International is now a global enterprise, distributing more than 80 million bibles annually in over 200 countries and 100 languages. Its 270,000 members (not counting ‘auxiliary members,’ as the wives of Gideons are patronizingly known) have doled out over *two billion* bibles since Nicholson and Hill made their distressing discovery in that Wisconsin hotel room.

It should be noted that not everyone is praising God for the arrangement. Not long after Gideons was formed, other groups like the Mormons copied the idea, insisting on equal time and trespassing on Gideon’s turf.

More problematically, in our age of affirmative action and political correctness, hotels that stock free bibles are sometimes faced with demands that they accommodate other faiths as well—an interior decorator’s worst nightmare, considering that there are over 4,300 practicing religions in the world.

Visitors to state parks and other publicly-owned lodging have sometimes attempted to sue for subverting the constitutionally guaranteed separation of Church and State, arguing that providing only one brand of religious text amounts to the government endorsing a particular religion. (Most such challenges have failed, with courts deeming bibles exempt from the usual restrictions, provided they are donated free of charge.)

Gideons’ advocates hasten to point out that more than one life has been saved when a suicidal person checked into a motel room planning to blow his brains out, only to find spiritual solace in a bedside *Gideons Bible*.

Despite their life-saving potential, however, bibles are rapidly disappearing from hotel rooms around the country, and not because recent converts are stealing them like toothpaste or towels. As one hotel chain spokesperson diplomatically put it, bibles are “inconsistent with our brand’s personality.”

This is largely the result of demographics, as hotels increasingly target younger guests like millennials, who happen to be the least religious generation in the nation’s history. (On the bright side—at least for bible enthusiasts—guests now invariably have digital access to scripture via that much more essential necessity: in-room Wi-Fi.)

All the same, it would probably be a good bet that The Gideons will be around for a long time yet to come, torches and trumpets in hand, to help with good Rocky’s—not to mention, the good book’s—revival. ■