Gutenberg Publishes the World's First Printed Book

The exact date that Johannes Gutenberg published his first book - *The Bible* - isn't clear, although some historians believe the first section was published on September 30, 1452. The completed book - according to the Library of Congress - may have been released around 1455 or 1456.

What is for sure is that Gutenberg's work, published on his printing press, changed the world. For the first time, books could be "mass produced" instead of "hand copied." It is believed that 48 originals, in various states of repair, still exist.

The British Library has two copies - one printed on paper, the other on vellum (from the French word *Vélin*, meaning calf's skin) - and they can be viewed and compared online.

The Bible, as Gutenberg published it, had 42 lines of text, evenly spaced in two columns:

> *Gutenberg's Bible was a marvel of technology and a beautiful work of art. It was truly a masterpiece. The letters were perfectly formed, not fuzzy or smudged. They were all the same height and stood tall and straight on the page. The 42 lines of text were spaced evenly in two perfect columns. The large versals were bright, colorful and artistic. Some pages had more colorful artwork weaving around the two columns of text.* (*Johannes Gutenberg: Inventor of the Printing Press*, by Fran Rees, page 67.)

Did Gutenberg know how important his work would become? Most historians think not:

> *Gutenberg must have been pleased with his handiwork. But he wouldn't have known then that this Bible would be considered one of the most beautiful books ever printed.* (Rees, page 67.)

Michael Inman, the New York Public Library's curator for rare books, explains the power of Gutenberg's *Bible:*

> *The mass printing of identical texts, which hadn't really been possible before Gutenberg, greatly facilitated the spread of knowledge. Over a period of several hundred years, language - spelling and grammar - was gradually codified. Literacy rates went up. More and more people were reading the same texts and discussing or debating the same ideas. This improvement in communication was one of the most important outcomes of printing ... NYPL is very much about the democratization of knowledge. The Bible epitomizes that ideal, which is to spread the power of learning, to empower people to learn.*

Was Gutenberg the first person in the world to use movable type? The answer to that question is "no." We have to look to Asia to learn about that part of printing's history:

- Bi Sheng (990-1051), who lived during the Song Dynasty (in China), invented movable type made of porcelain;

- Korea was the first place where a movable-type system was invented which could be used for large-scale printing (because it was made of metal instead of porcelain). This took place in about 1230 (during the Goryeo Dynasty).

The oldest still-existing book, printed from this Korean system, is a compilation of Buddhist teachings known as *Jikji*. That abbreviation stands for "Anthology of Great Buddhist Priests' Zen Teachings."

This book - reportedly published in July of 1377 - is thus the oldest example of a work published with metal movable type.

The image, at the top of this page, depicts an artist's visualization of Gutenberg, at work in his printing shop. Click on the picture for a full-page view.

Credits:

Image, based on a 19th-century steel engraving, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

PD

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Gutenberg-Publishes-the-World-s-First-Printed-Book

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Gutenberg-Publishes-the-World-s-First-Printed-Book