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Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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Bible Passages at Inaugurations

Is it customary for presidents to swear the oath of office on a Bible? Which passages do they use?

Yes, it is customary. At the beginning of a president's term in office, there are two situations in which Bibles are ceremonially used: (1) at a private swearing in, which several presidents have taken part in, among them Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge, and Dwight Eisenhower; and (2) at the public swearing in that is integral to the inaugural ceremony. Nothing in the U.S. Constitution requires that presidents swear on the Bible or otherwise use the book as part of their inauguration, but our first president, George Washington, started the precedent. At his first inauguration in 1789, he used a Masonic Bible that had been printed in 1767. It was opened to an Old Testament passage. At least three later presidents used Washington's Masonic Bible at their own inaugurations, all of them Republicans: Warren Harding (1921), Dwight Eisenhower (1953), and George H. W. Bush (1989). George W. Bush wanted to use Washington's Bible in 2001, but bad weather kept him from doing so.



Following George Washington's precedent, our nation's chief executives have used the Bible in most if not all inaugurations, as well as in several private swearing in ceremonies. On at least 30 formal occasions, we know that the Bible was opened to Old Testament passages. On at least 10 formal occasions, we know that the Bible was opened to New Testament passages. Following is the breakdown.

OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES

The following presidents had the book opened to a specific Old Testament passage:

- Van Buren's inauguration (1837): Proverbs 3:17.
- Andrew Johnson's swearing in (1865): Proverbs 21.
- Grant's second inaugural (1873): Isaiah 11:1-3.
- Hayes's inauguration (1877): Psalm 118:11-13.
- Garfield's inaugural (1881): Proverbs 21:1.
- Arthur's swearing in (1881): Psalm 31:1-3.
- Harrison's inaugural (1889): Psalm 121: 1-6.
- Cleveland's second inaugural (1893): Psalm 91:12-16.
- McKinley's Bible during the first inaugural (1897) was opened to II Chronicles 1:10, and in his second inaugural (1901) it was opened to Proverbs 16.
- Taft (1909): I Kings 3:9-11.
- Wilson's first inaugural (1913): Psalm 119; Wilson's second inaugural (1917): Psalm 46.
- Harding (1921) used Washington's Masonic Bible, opened to Micah 6:8.
- Hoover's Bible at the inauguration (1929) was open to Proverbs 29:18.
- Truman's Bible at his inauguration (1949) was open to Exodus 20:3-17 (the Bible was also opened to a New Testament passage).
- Eisenhower's first inauguration (1953) incorporated George Washington's Masonic Bible opened to Psalm 127:1, plus a West Point Bible opened to II Chronicles 7:14; his second inauguration (1957) had the West Point Bible opened to Psalm 33:12.
- Nixon used two family Bibles, both opened to the same passage during both the first (1969) and second (1973) inaugurations: Isaiah 2:4
- Ford's swearing in (1974): Proverbs 3:5-6
- Carter (1977) used a family Bible opened to Micah 6:8.
- Reagan used the Bible given to him by his mother at both the first (1981) and second (1985) inaugurations, as well as in the private swearing in in 1985. On all these occasions the Bible was opened to II Chronicles 7:14.
- Clinton's second inaugural (1997) featured the King James Bible given to him by his grandmother, opened to Isaiah 58:12
- George W. Bush's second inaugural

The following presidents had the Bible opened at random, and because the Old Testament is so much larger than the New Testament, the book would inevitably be opened to an Old Testament passage:

- The Masonic Bible used in Washington's first inaugural was opened to the page containing Genesis 49:13.
- Lincoln's first inaugural.
- At Cleveland's first inaugural the chief justice who presided over the swearing in opened the Bible at random to Psalm 112:4-10.
- George H. W. Bush had Washington's Masonic Bible opened at random in the middle; also had the family Bible opened to a New Testament passage.

The passage from II Chronicles 7:14 was used in three swearing-in ceremonies. It is a verse of repentance: *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

The following presidents had the Bible opened to a New Testament passage:

- Lincoln's second inaugural (1865) incorporated three passages: Matthew 7:1 and 18:7, and Revelation 16:7.
- Theodore Roosevelt's inaugural (1905): James 1:22-23
- Coolidge: John 1
- Franklin Roosevelt's four inaugurations (1933, 1937, 1941, 1945): I Corinthians 13
- Truman's inaugural: Matthew 5:3-11 (the Bible was also opened to an OT passage)
- George H. W. Bush featured the family Bible opened to Matthew 5. He also had Washington's Masonic Bible opened at random in the middle;
- Clinton's first inaugural (1993) featured the King James Bible given to him by his grandmother, opened to Galatians 6:8.

CLOSED BIBLES

The following presidents had a Bible with them to mark the beginning of their term but kept it closed, in George W. Bush's case due to bad weather:

- Truman's 1945 swearing in.
- Kennedy's 1961 inaugural.
- Johnson's 1965 inaugural.
- George W. Bush's family Bible was kept closed during the 2001 inaugural, due to bad weather; he had wanted to use Washington's Masonic Bible.

Two additional pieces of information. Pierce had a Bible at the inauguration, but we do not have enough historical information to know whether it was closed or open to a particular passage. We do know that he did not "solemnly swear," but "solemnly affirmed" the oath of office.

And Lyndon Johnson used not a Bible but a missal when he was privately sworn in aboard Air Force I on November 22, 1963, shortly after Kennedy was assassinated.

NO BIBLE USED

The three cases in which historians know that no Bible was used (in all three instances Republicans):

- Hayes's private swearing in (1877);
- Arthur's private swearing in (1881);
- Theodore Roosevelt's swearing in at Buffalo, New York, (1901) upon McKinley's death.

NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION

While there are eye-witness accounts of every presidential swearing-in and inauguration, we do not have all the details about the use of a Bible at these events. According to the Office of the Curator and Architect of the Capitol, there is not enough information for the following events:

- Washington's second inaugural
- Adams's inaugural
- Jefferson's first and second inaugurals
- Madison's first and second inaugurals
- Monroe's first and second inaugurals
- Quincy Adams's inaugural
- Harrison's inaugural
- Tyler's swearing in (upon Harrison's death)
- Polk's inaugural
- Taylor's inaugural
- Fillmore's swearing in (upon Taylor's death)
- Buchanan's inaugural
- Grant's first inaugural
- Wilson's private swearing in before his second inaugural
- Coolidge's private swearing in by his father at his boyhood home (upon Harding's death)
- Eisenhower's private swearing in before his second inaugural.

Regarding the above, historians cannot say that no Bible was used; they do not know if or which edition was used, or to which passage it may have been opened.

OTHER RELIGIOUS WORDS AND GESTURES AT INAUGURATIONS

Finally, George Washington not only began the precedent of using a Bible at his inauguration; he also began two related precedents -- (1) adding the words "so help me God" to the constitutionally mandated oath of office, and (2) kissing the Bible after taking the oath. Not all presidents have kissed the Bible as Washington did, but many have.

(Question from Barbara C. of Colorado Springs, CO)