

THE WICKED BIBLE

Take the word "Bible", preface it with the adjective "wicked", and you have the epitome of all paradoxes. Add a dash of intrigue, a touch of sabotage, a portion of pathos, the thrill of discovery, and you have the elements of the story of that Wicked Bible.

What is wicked about the Wicked Bible? The principal iniquitous feature is its translation of the Seventh Commandment. Every Sunday School scholar knows that the commandment states in no uncertain terms, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." But this Bible reads with unbelievable clarity and audacity: "Thou shalt commit adultery." It could qualify, therefore, as the basis for the "new morality" of our day, though it came 300 years or more ahead of that movement. And yet, in spite of the inroads of the new morality, it has not yet been able to erase the standards of the thunderings from Sinai, for even the biblically untaught know that the commandment is a negative. I have opened my Wicked Bible to Exodus 20 and shown it to any number of people asking them to read the Ten Commandments aloud. Only about one in ten will read the Seventh Commandment as it is printed in the text that is open before them. The others will automatically insert the "not." Even on a second or third try they will not read what is there in front of their eyes. The inconceivability of a command in the Bible to commit adultery seems to guard their lips. And it is unthinkable, but there it is--a Bible that not only permits but actually commands adultery, and that is why it is called the Wicked Bible.

The mistranslation of the Seventh Commandment is not the only wickedness in this early King James Bible. Luke 23:32 is translated: "And there were also two other malefactors led with him to be put to death." The implication is that Jesus was Himself also a malefactor as well as the two thieves who were crucified with Him. Our present-day King James Bibles avoid this sacrilege by placing commas around the word "malefactors" thus relieving Jesus of the association with them. This, of course, accurately reflects the Greek text which uses a word in the plural ("others") that denotes a qualitative difference between Jesus and the criminals. Unnoticed by some, however, is the fact that this error is not unique to the Wicked Bible, for it is found in both the "He" and "She" issues of the first edition of the Authorized Version. It continued to be reproduced even as late as and in an exemplary edition as Baskerville's 1763 folio Bible.¹

As if to add to the paradoxes surrounding this Bible, the first purchase order for a Wicked Bible was executed on a Sunday. The existence of the Wicked Bible had been mentioned after its suppression for more than two hundred years before the first copy was identified. History records the punishment assessed on the printers for the error in the printing, but until 1855 no one had identified the long lost edition. Henry Stevens, who played such a prominent part in the assembling of

¹Victor Hugo Paltsits. Reviser of Henry Steven's Recollections of James Lennox, (New York Public Library, 1951), calls attention to this mistake in the Wicked Bible and concludes erroneously that "the discovery of this sacrilegious error must have brought about its suppression more than the omitted negative in the Seventh Commandment" p. 32.

the library of James Lennox recounts the discovery in his Recollections of James Lennox.¹ The offer came to Stevens the afternoon of Saturday June 16 that year and required an immediate answer. "However," Stevens writes, "I raised some points of inquiry and obtained permission to hold the little sinner and give the answer on Monday."² He immediately wrote James Lennox who posted his order to buy the Bible on the following day, Sunday. On Monday the purchase was completed and on the following Thursday Stevens exhibited it at the meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London. It was Stevens who nicknamed it "The Wicked Bible" which name has stuck during these more than one hundred years. The proceedings of the Society state in part: "Although the book has been diligently sought after for the last hundred years, no copy has hitherto been known to have been discovered; and though many writers have told the story for the last two hundred years, no one identified the edition or indicated the year in which it was printed. The present volume settles the question."³

This first copy came from Holland, from the library of John Cranne, a nonconformist divine and printer, who was pastor of an English congregation in Amsterdam. It was bound with the Book of Common Prayer, Genealogies, and the Psalms in Meter. It was offered at first to Stevens for the relatively high price of fifty guineas since it was

¹Ibid., Pp. 27-32.

²Ibid., p. 27.

³Ibid., p. 28.

thought to be the only copy in existence. However, as Stevens was looking through some Bibles he had laid aside for collation and binding that Saturday night, he discovered that he was already the possessor of a Wicked Bible which lacked 23 pages in the Psalms. When, therefore, the owner came on the following Monday for his Bible or his money, Stevens produced his own copy and thereby promptly cut the price by more than half--to 25. However, Stevens did not in turn cut the price to Lennox, since the record tells us that Lennox paid 52 pounds 10 shillings for the Bible. Perhaps this was an agent's normal commission in those days, which if the original asking price had been paid, might have pushed the cost to Lennox up to one hundred guineas. By comparison, in 1965, a copy sold at auction (at Parke-Bernet) for \$55, but it was imperfect. So the unique Bible was not unique, and Stevens himself was able to locate six copies during his own lifetime. As far as the Sunday purchase order was concerned, Stevens assures us that he "never heard that Mr. Lennox ever felt or expressed any compunctions of conscience for having ordered it on a Sunday."¹

To understand how devastating it was for the commandment to read "Thou shalt commit adultery", it is only necessary to consider the effect this would have had on the reader of that day. For some earnest and perhaps uneducated Christian, this may have been the first book he ever owned, and one can easily picture the eagerness with which he began to read his newly acquired treasure. It is not difficult,

¹Ibid., p. 30.

therefore, to imagine his consternation when he came to the twentieth chapter of Exodus. How would he understand that this was a mistake and a word had been left out? The seriousness of the misprint can scarcely be exaggerated.

The punishment suited the crime. The Bible was apparently in circulation for at least a year, for it was not until the latter part of 1632 that the case came before William Laud, then Bishop of London, in the Court of High Commission. Laud had "stirred not till the Bible was could into his house, bought by his footman".¹ Laud complained about the bad paper as well as the carelessness of the printing, and when the error was noticed he brought it to the attention of the King who ordered the printers into court. The following account of the matter comes from a book issued in 1668. "His Majesties Printers, at or about this time (1632), had committed a scandalous mistake in our English Bibles, by leaving out the word Not in the Seventh Commandment. His Majesty being made acquainted with it by the Bishop of London. Order was given for calling the Printers into the High-Commission, where upon Evidence of the Fact, the whole Impression was called in, and the Printers deeply fined, and they justly merited. With some part of this Fine Laud causeth a fair Greek Character to be provided, for publishing such Manuscripts as Time and Industry should make ready for the Publick view; of which sort were the Catena and Theophylact set out by Lyndsell".²

¹S. R. Gardiner, Reports of Cases in the Court of Star Chamber and High Commission, vol. 29, Camden, n.s., 1889, p. 305.

²Peter Heylyn Cyprianus Anglicus, London, 1663, p. 228.

The fine was £300 which according to some authorities was divided between Robert Barker (£200) and Martin Lucas (£100) who may have been associated with Barker in this printing.¹ In addition the entire edition of 1000 copies was ordered to be destroyed. Apparently this was done quite successfully; otherwise a copy or more would have turned up before 200 years had passed.

According to the report of the case, in their own defense "the Printers say this is stirred up by the malice of one man against them." This gives us a clue to the intrigue part of the story of the Wicked Bible, but in order to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, it is necessary to understand what was involved in the Bible Patent of those days.²

As an exclusive right to print various items, the patent for royal printers developed slowly until 1577 when statute books, proclamations, Bibles, Testaments, and the Book of Common Prayer were formally included in a patent giving exclusive rights. Richard Grafton who began his career as the publisher of the "Matthew" Bible which was printed in 1537 probably in Antwerp recorded the cost of the 1500 copies at £500 (nearer £5000 today). Since he estimated that it would take him nearly three years to get his investment back, he asked Cromwell to protect him against printing pirates and to instruct every curate in England to buy one copy and every monastery six. Cromwell acceded to the request, and

¹The Cambridge History of the Bible. Cambridge, 1963, p. 412.

²P. M. Handover, Printing in London, Cambridge, Mass., 1960, pp. 73-85.

thus the Bible patent began to be delineated. Grafton's appeal was based, for one thing, on the number of sentences in the Bible and the multiplied possibilities of error that could creep into a book which must be produced without any mistakes.

Indeed, this is one of the particular peculiarities of Bible printing. The Authorized Version, for instance, contains 774,746 words. But the enormous amount of work involved in setting and printing this number of words is not the only problem in Bible production. As Grafton pointed out to Cromwell, typographical mistakes cannot be tolerated in the Bible. Nevertheless these liabilities are offset by some assets for the man who undertakes this herculean task. The Bible is a book for which there is a constant demand, and this demand includes the need for a whole range of sizes in which it may be issued. Unless competition is fierce, this guarantees a market to the printer of Bibles, and the patent, of course, took care of the competition. One can readily see, too, that these distinctive problems of Bible production demanded especially in pre-computer times a printer who was a genius at analyzing, organizing and coordinating the various aspects of publishing a Bible. If he lacked these qualities, he could expect only the worst kind of disaster.

It was not long before this happened. In the printing of the Great Bible Grafton was joined by Edward Whitchurch and together they printed seven editions of the Great Bible between 1539 and 1541. This was no small accomplishment which led in 1547 to their being officially awarded the Bible patent by Henry VIII. Under Queen Mary no English Bibles or Books of Common Prayer were issued, but with the accession of

Elizabeth the patent was given to John Cawood and Richard Jugge. It was Jugge who was the first to fail.

Jugge's first Bible was the sumptuous Bishop's which appeared in 1563. In the year of the second edition (1572) Cawood died though the patent remained with Jugge. Difficulties mounted to the point where the Government and the Church brought pressure on Jugge to share the patent with other printers simply because he could not produce Bibles fast enough. In the end Jugge was limited to the printing of quarto Bibles and sixteenmo Testaments.

In the meantime Christopher Barker, a wealthy draper, became interested in printing and obtained a privilege to print the Geneva Bible which was fast gaining popularity over the Bishop's. Barker's first Geneva Bible appeared in 1576, a year after five other printers including Jugge and William Norton organized a campaign to outprint the Geneva Bible. But in 1577 Jugge died, the campaign collapsed, and Barker was given the patent. He was a successful and clever businessman who kept the country supplied with accurate and attractive Bibles until his death in 1599. He also had the foresight to secure the patent for his son, Robert, who was thoroughly trained and eventually became the printer of the King James Version.

Although King James had called for the translation of the new version and had laid down the ground rules, he did little to finance it. The collators and revisers were paid by Barker who because of mounting expenses had to borrow funds from Bouham Norton and possibly John Bill. Indeed, Norton may have been responsible for part of the

printing in his own office. At any rate, Norton began a campaign to obtain the patent for himself. Norton and Barker were closely associated in business; Barker's son, Christopher II married Norton's daughter; and Barker, because of financial pressure, agreed to assign the patent for one year to Norton and Bill. From this time on, Barker's troubles multiplied. Norton refused to return the patent after the year, went to court about it, and succeeded in keeping it from Barker until 1620 and then required it to be shared with Bill who has purchased his part in good faith. Not being content with this, Norton finally had Barker completely removed from the privileges of the patent on the ground that he had not paid the price of 11,000 which Norton claimed for his share. But Barker did not give in, and for nine years he struggled to regain Norton's share of the patent which he felt was rightfully his. At last in 1629 Barker paid Norton 8000 to settle the case. But it was not settled in Norton's mind, for he publicly vilified Barker and did everything possible to put him out of business, even to stealing his composing irons.

All of this historical recital is for the purpose of illuminating the statement at Barker's trial that the mistake in the Wicked Bible was due to one man who had stirred all this up. Does it not seem likely that the same man who did everything possible to ruin Barker would stoop to suborning a workman to allow the blasphemous mistake to be included in the 1631 Wicked Bible? This could hardly have been an accidental oversight simply because it is in a passage that is too well known for a typesetter or collator to miss, and too well known for the public not to miss.

Norton had gained his personal victory, for the fine levied for this mistake brought Barker to ruin. Bill was dead and Barker struggled under the load of debt until 1634 when he was compelled to lease his printing house, stock and equipment, and the patent to others. But Norton's victory was short-lived, for he himself died disgraced and in prison in 1635. In that same year Barker was committed to the King's Bench Prison for debt and died 10 years later as a prisoner though from natural causes.

This is the story of the Wicked Bible--a measure of intrigue in order to acquire the coveted Bible patent; a touch of sabotage to produce the error; a portion of pathos for the ruin it brought to everybody; and the excitement of discovery of a copy two hundred years later. And, one may add, there is the thrill of simply gazing on this volume which is unique in so many ways.