

The Mistake
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Tinted pages, faded ink, and crinkled edges reveal the most read text in the world. Old words, yet each resound new in the life of the individual. However, something was strange about the small King James Bible published in 1631 AD by Martin Lucas and Robert Barker. It quickly drew lots of chatter after its release. In fact, it caused so much commotion that its publishers received a fine big enough to drain their yearly wages and every one of the 1,000 copies was ordered to be destroyed. All this chaos was created over one simple three letter word omitted from the text. Within the Ten Commandments, the word ‘not’ was left out from its usual place between the words ‘shalt’ and ‘commit adultery.’ This simple omission created a completely different set of commandments in the 1,000 bibles that were printed. Besides all of the historical facts we can discover from the “Wicked Bible,” there are also spiritual facts we can learn as well.

To gain insight from the “Wicked Bible,” history must be recounted. The printing press was invented in the 1440’s and had been in London since the 1470’s. Even though printing had become more efficient, purchase and distribution of printed merchandise was in its infancy. In those early days, individual book ownership was uncommon. However, as book circulation increased, demand grew, and print related jobs eventually became very popular. Country leaders were eager to regulate this growing economy. For instance, King Henry VIII established many patents over printing items. Professional printers with multiple presses began training apprentices. These Master Printers eventually formed a group of leaders with patents for different items to print. The highest and most sought after patent position was that of the Queen’s Printer and it was Robert Barker’s father, Christopher, who gained this influential position as the

Queen's Printer in 1583. This appointment meant that Christopher would be the only one to print official documents, bibles, and other sacred papers in London.¹

Robert Barker eventually took over his father's practice and title in the early 1600's after his father's death. He had already been working as a printer for a while. Robert Barker's partner at the time of the printing of the "Wicked" Bible is not really discussed in many places. He was just one of Barker's "associates".² Although Martin Lucas may have been just a worker, he must have done work like this before, or he most likely would not have been asked to produce and distribute these bibles. Inexperience is not likely to have been the cause for the mistake in printing.

Some sources say that Robert Barker had an arch nemesis by the name of Bonham Norton. When Robert Barker took over his father's patent, Norton was an equally wealthy printer, and like all of the Master Printers, he sought the title of Queen's Printer. Oddly enough, Barker and Norton eventually became friends and started working together. In fact, they printed a version of the King James Bible together in 1611, and their children married each other in 1615. However, in 1618, Norton and Barker sued each other over some shares of the company that Norton and Barker's son, Christopher, both owned. This drawn out problem affected the printed bibles. Within the next few years, different bibles had different printer's names on them. As this was going on, the title of being the Queen's Printer was confused alternately between Robert Barker and Norton. Eventually, Robert Barker was clearly established as the Queen's Printer. Norton was extremely jealous the whole time.³

¹ Feather, John. *A History of British Publishing*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988, 34.

² Kennish, Janet. "Robert Barker, Printer, to Queen Elizabeth I". *Datchet Village History*. 2008.

³ Kennish.

In light of the rivalry between Norton and Barker, there is a question that can be asked. Could the “vexatious” Norton have sabotaged the bible printing?⁴ What else could explain the absence of the word “not” with a man so experienced as Barker? This would have been a perfect way to affect Barker in all aspects. Barker’s publishing consistency and reliability would be questioned for years to come. Norton would then have a chance to become the King’s Printer with Barker out of the way. It was the perfect plan to undo Barker. It is also logical since not just one letter was missing, which was how printing presses worked—letter by letter, but a whole word was less likely. A more typical printing mistake would be for the word to have been switched “nto” instead of “not.”

There is also speculation that the “Wicked Bible” was actually one that Robert Barker was supposed to destroy since it was on the black market. This theory could be true. However, since there was no real motivation for Barker to do such a thing, this seems to be a less likely explanation. A more obvious historical trivia is that the “Wicked Bible” is not the only one of its kind. There were many error filled sacred scriptures that were published and recalled. Ray Russell recollects a large amount of misprinted bibles and their various names and errors in *The “Wicked” Bibles*.

The printing press allows for exact copies of various writings, but it does not eliminate initial human error. This small fact points to a truth that must be realized. Our Lord is great and will always make himself known even with human error in the world. Since God has sent us the Holy Spirit through Jesus, the living God within us works with the living word and reveals His true character. The beauty of this fact is that the Holy Spirit also reveals when something is not of God. Errors in the bibles printed are made obvious, when someone knows the true character of God.

⁴ Kennish.

God is able to rule over human error. Not only does His ability apply to oddly printed bibles but to the occasional misinformation offered by church leaders and fellow believers. God will always reveal His identity to those of faith who have gained salvation through Christ, “for in it (salvation) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’”.⁵ Although there is no real need for *wariness* when listening to a preacher, or reading a Bible, there does need to be *awareness*. A life of faith is active and measures by God’s revealed presence. Without constant communication with Him through prayer and scripture reading, there is no knowledge of His character, and deception may creep in unnoticed.

The “Wicked Bible” is now kept on display, but for what reason? Could it be because God is greater than any mistake? God shines through what many see as a mistake. He reveals His almighty glory through the broken lives of the world. Our flaws contrast His perfection and magnify His indescribable mercy. God does not need us, but He wants us, uses us, and includes our mistakes for His glory. The mistake of the “Wicked Bible” is the beauty of it, because it is us.

Works Cited

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⁵ Romans 1:17