

The Wicked Bible



John Bill, my daughter-in-law's 10th great grandfather, was born in Shropshire, England in 1576. He was apparently living in London in 1613 where he was identified as "publisher to King James I, Most Excellent Majestie." John Bill, and his partner Christopher Barker, were given the exclusive license to publish the Bible along with other writings of the royal court.

Unfortunately, he is probably best remembered for the publication of "The Wicked Bible." In 1631, John Bill's company, Printing House Square, under the supervision of Robert Barker (Christopher's son), released a version of the King James Bible which included some grievous errors. Most notably was the omission of the word "not" from the Seventh Commandment, making it read, "Thou shalt commit adultery."

A second misprint was found in Deuteronomy 5 where the word "greatness" was replaced with "great-asse," making the verse read "Behold, the Lord our God hath showed us his glory and his great-asse."

The second mistake led many to believe that the errors were intentional and that this publication was sabotaged by rival printers so that Printing House Square would lose their monopoly granted to them by the king. This was never proven. However, in 1632, the printers were summoned to the Star Chamber and fined three hundred pounds (equivalent to approximately \$50,000 today). Their printing license was also revoked. Barker never recovered and died in pauper's prison. John Bill, who died a year before this travesty occurred, did not live to witness it. His son, Charles, who apprenticed alongside him, had left the business prior to the event. The Bill family would eventually emigrate to America where they prospered.

Meanwhile, the royal court ordered all copies of the errant version to be collected and destroyed. A few managed to escape notice. There are sixteen known copies of The Wicked Bible still in existence in museums and libraries around the world as well as a few in private collections. They occasionally come up for auction. In 2008, one was purchased for approximately \$96,000.

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