

Emil Simon

H#01186447

simonem@hbu.edu

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The Bible Says What?

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From the raggedy drawers in dingy motel rooms to the elegantly furnished bookshelves of world famous libraries, one book sits with a story that started thousands of years ago and, to this day, continues. Over the course of history, numerous books have risen and influenced the contemporary world and its principles. However, none holds the phenomenal power over individual lives and various cultures across the globe like *The Holy Bible*. The story of the Bible is not one of clean edges and perfection. Rather this collection of Judo-Christian sacred texts has been put through several years of intensive revisions, introspections, mutations, and evaluations to become the well-renowned binding of Sacred Scriptures that is now found everywhere. In the heart of Houston, TX, sheltered among the walls of Houston Baptist University's Dunham Bible Museum, sits a link to the story of the Bible—the infamous *Wicked Bible*.

The *Wicked Bible* is the product of “a blasphemous typographical error that made its way into print” in the year 1631 under the hands of England's royal printers, Robert Barker and Martin Lucas (Bever). At the time, King Charles I of England had commissioned the duo to print substantial copies of this small, pocket-sized Bible as to have “full-text copies of the [it]” more readily and cheaply available for purchase around the kingdom (Green). However, nearly a year later, an irrevocable mistake was discovered “after 1,000 copies were printed, [thus] causing an uproar in [the old] conservative Anglican Britain” (Muhr).

Nevertheless, the question remains; what was this grave mistake? What typographical error gave this edition of the Bible a permanent and significant spot in the history of Bibles? Upon viewing the pages of the book, it is evident that the editors of the sacred texts “omitted the word ‘not’ [from] Exodus 20:14” (Muhr), thus rendering the original verse from saying “Thou

shalt *not* commit adultery” to “Thou shalt commit adultery.” Three letters, one small, seemingly insignificant word—not. However, those three letters are all it took for this edition of the Bible to go from being a sacred and revered text to a sacrilegious and vulgar version of the religious book. Fortunately the laymen and the commoners of the time were familiar enough with the Ten Commandments as to not act upon this blunder. According to HBU’s very own Diana Severance, director of the Dunham Bible Museum, “There was enough Christian teaching, and pervasive Christian teaching in England, to know that this [profanity] was an error” (Green). As a result, there was no noteworthy religious impact on 17th century England that was a direct result of the distribution of the *Wicked Bible*.

Though the *Wicked Bible* is more famously known for a typographical error in the Book of Exodus, there is in fact a second, almost equally grave mistake in Deuteronomy 5:24. The printers in that particular verse “inadvertently replaced the word ‘greatness’ with the text ‘great arse,’ thus suggesting that the Lord showed His glory and ‘great arse’” (Fowler). The appearance of this second mistake was only discovered later and upon closer examination of the original text. However by this time, the fate of the copies of the *Wicked Bible* and that of its printers were already decided. After the gravity of the error was made evident to King Charles I, he ordered both Barker and Lucas to the Star Chamber, and the two “criminals” were immediately “fined [around 300 pounds, equivalent to nearly 50,000 pounds today,] and stripped of their lucrative printing contract” (Osborne). Barker, later on, died while he was still suffering away in debtor’s jail. In addition, all but eleven copies of the Bible were hunted down and burned in an attempt to erase all evidence of its cursed existence.

The great typographical errors of the *Wicked Bible* have numerous stories attributed to its origin. The whispers around the 17th century England took many different and extreme paths.

Some called it an unintentional printing error. While others claimed that Barker and Lucas were trying to intentionally spread profanity and religious heresy around England. According to the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, the printers were not “grave and learned men” and ought not to be entrusted with such responsibilities (McLelland). However, the most extreme and perhaps quite plausible explanation to the mystery, is the theory that Robert Barker’s project was sabotaged by his contemporary “rival, Bonham Norton, [as] to politically embarrass Barker” (Flood). The evidence to this theory is none other than the appearance of the second mistake, which is too deviant from the original word ‘greatness’ to be the cause of mere carelessness. And in reality, Norton got more than he could have ever hoped for when Barker was stripped of his printing license and slowly died while still in debtor’s jail.

Despite the *Wicked Bible*’s shady and rather tragic history, it is still a significant book in the collection of Bibles in the Dunham Museum. It’s thin, wrinkled yellow pages teach onlookers to not take the Bible and its history for granted. The *Wicked Bible* is, in essence, history immortalized under fine lighting and controlled humidity. The five dollar bibles that any ordinary child can now buy from Wal-Mart are the work of numerous lives and generations. It demonstrates that despite occasional errors and mishaps, the Word of God survives to tell a greater story, that it survives to still influence the hearts of millions of people around the world.

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