

Sunday, December 1, 2024—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 247 Assessing the Printed History of the King James Text (1713-1760)

Introduction

- In [Lesson 246](#) we surveyed the printed history of the text between the years 1660 and 1713. In doing so, we observed the following points:
 - John Field improved his reputation as a printer after the Restoration in 1660. His 1660 octavo (H669) edition made some modest contributions to the history of the text in terms of spelling.
 - Publishers sought to capitalize on the market by altering the metatextual information such as marginal notes.
 - 1653 (H640)—Henry Hammond’s popular *A Paraphrase, and Annotations Upon all the Books of the New Testament* (H640) gave the KJB text a paraphrase and annotations.
 - 1675 (H719 and 720)—Oxford published its first text. This edition did little to the text other than employ idiosyncratic spelling which aroused some complaint: the new publisher thus failed to stake out new ground.
 - 1679 (H744–6)—Further supplementary material was introduced in the second Oxford edition notably the dates which long remained a fixture in the KJB and can still be found in some editions. Here they are given as years after the Creation, the Nativity being dated 4,000. (Norton, 99-100)
 - “Cambridge declined then disappeared as a printer and publisher of Bibles, its last edition from more than half a century appearing in 1683.” (Norton, *A Short History*, 152)
 - Market conditions improved and the cost of Bibles came down during the later portion of the 17th century.
 - “Such competition and increase in supply led to a substantial fall in the price of Bibles: in a memorandum written in 1684, Fell noted that folios had fallen from £6 [\$1,743.61 in today’s money, according to Eric W. Nye’s, [Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency](#). Nye’s website is the source for all the conversion in these notes.] to £1 [\$290.6] 10s, and that the smallest formats were now sold at 1s 4d. Bulk purchase for charity contributed to this fall.” (Norton, *A Short History*, 153)
- In the current Lesson we will look at the dominant figure in Bible printing during the early 18th century—John Baskett.

A Hundred Years Of Solitude (1660-1760)

- The first half of the 18th century saw John Baskett ascend as the preeminent printer of the King James Bible. Professor David Norton summarizes how this came about in *A Textual History of the King James Bible*:
 - “For the next half century the dominant name in English Bible publishing was that of Baskett. John Baskett, through a series of purchases from 1710 on, became Queen’s Printer (as the title then was) [Queen Ann ascended the throne on March 8, 1702.] in both England and Scotland, and, from 1713 on, he leased the Oxford right to print Bibles. These rights passed to his sons Thomas and Robert in 1742. Since Cambridge stayed out of the market until 1743, this meant a long period of monopoly which did little that was good for either the text or the price of Bibles.” (Norton, 101)
- Harry Carter, author of *A History of Oxford University Press: Volume 1: To Year 1780* has a lot to say about the career of John Baskett.
 - “Evidence of Baskett’s turning publisher and wholesale bookseller dates from 1706. It was on 5 August in that year, according to the Stationers’ records, that Baskett informed the Court of Assistances of his agreement with the University about the printing of Clarendon. [“*The History of the Rebellion* by Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon and former advisor to Charles I and Charles II, is his account of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Originally published between 1702 and 1704 as *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, it was the first detailed account from a key player in the events it covered.” Wikipedia.com] This refers to the folio edition of 1707, of *The History*, and in the next year he commissioned the University to print the work again in six volumes octavo. For some reason the Stationers’ English Stock declined the offer to deal in both these editions, and the court ordered that Baskett ‘be desired to take them away’; but it is likely that he disposed of them profitably, for he was allowed to print more editions of *The History* at the press at Oxford in 1711, 1716, 1719, and 1728. The editions that Baskett sponsored do not bear his name, and only entries in the Account of the Press show that they are not, as they appear to be, publications of the University. From 1711 onwards he bought large quantities, sometimes as much as two-thirds of the impressions, of the Oxford Almanack, for which he also furnished the paper. In sum, he was a substantial financier of the work of the Oxford Learned Press from 1707 until 1729.

It must be supposed that Baskett spent some time laying plans for capturing the trade in Bibles and prayer books. They came to light soon after he bought a sixth share in the reversion to the patent of King’s Printer in 1710, when the term granted in 1635 to Charles and Matthew Barker was about to expire and a grant in reversion to Henry Hills and Thomas Newcombe made in 1675 to take effect. By agreement with the other

stockholders, ‘and for the benefit of them’, Baskett was sworn Queen’s Printer ‘about the month of April [1712]’. He held the appointment for the rest of his life, and since his name appears alone in the imprints of the King’s Printing Office from 1724 onwards there is an inference that he bought out the other shares in the patent about that time.

In 1711 Baskett bought a third share in the patent granted to Robert Freebairn Queen’s Printer in Scotland. It is clear that he was on good terms with Freebairn, for soon afterwards these two, unsuccessfully, tried to oust the holder of the third share. Baskett therefore, had secured the two exclusion privileges of print and selling bibles and service books in Great Britain. It remained to protect his monopoly against the two English Universities, whose charters gave them the right to print ‘all manner of books’ including any that were subject to royal monopolies.

It surprised the Stationers on 10 September 1711 when ‘the Master informed the Court that he understood that the University of Oxford had granted the privilege that the Company had left to them and which would expire at Lady Day come twelve months to some other person than the Company.’ They ordered that a deputation should meet Mr. Baskett and Mr. Williams and try to get from them some security against damage to the English Stock by reason of the change. The new lease from the University to Baskett, John William and Samel Ashurst was dated 2 January 1711/12. The previous lease, of September 1708, was made for five years to Philipps, Mortlock, and Andrews, trustees for the English Stock, but the new lease, for twenty-one years from 1713, was for the benefit of Baskett.

The Company, if it had been disposed to war with Baskett, might have printed Bibles at Cambridge, where the University Printer, Hayes, and his press were subject to the absolute control by virtue of a lease of 1705 for 21 years. Cambridge had not produced a bible since 1682. However, the Company chose the way of peaceful negotiations with Baskett, and no Bible was printed at Cambridge until 1743.

Agreement was reached in October 1712. Baskett finally contented himself with an annual payment of £200 [\$51,925.66], the equivalent of his rent for the University’s privilege, for not printing the books reserved for the English Stock, plus the £30 [\$7,788.85] a year paid by Roger Norton of the Company for not contesting his exclusive right to the *Grammar*. Baskett abandoned a claim to print enough metrical psalms to go with his Oxford Bibles and agreed to buy them from the English Stock, folio copies for 1s and quartos for 6d.

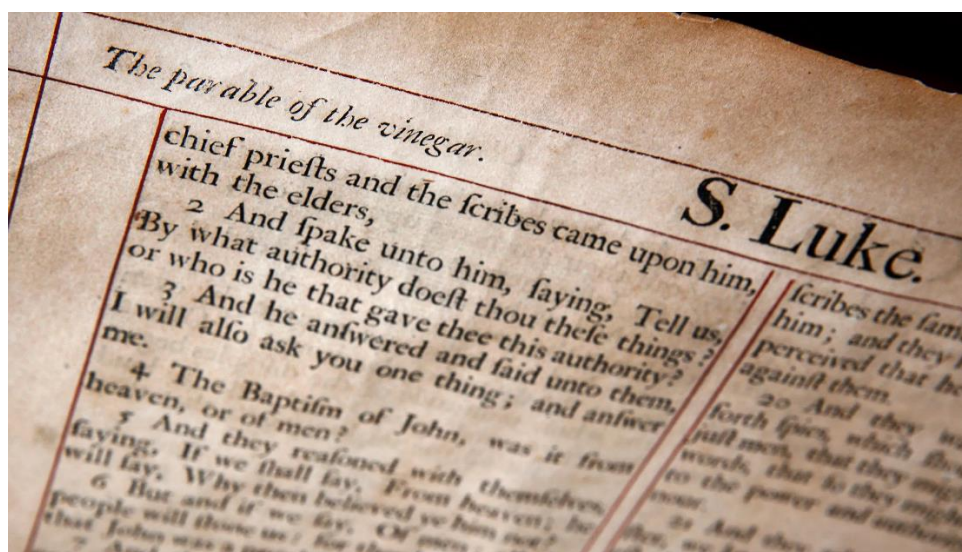
Two Bibles with Baskett’s imprint at Oxford were published in 1715, and in the same year he printed 2 New Testaments and a Book of Common Prayer there. In the same year his name with those of the assigns of Newcome and Hills first appears on a Bible from the King’s Printing House in London. In Edinburgh he is said to have set up a printing office in 1725, and the first of his Edinburgh Bibles came out in the following year. He continued to print the bible, the New Testament, and the prayer book in various formats

and sizes of type at London and Oxford until his death in 1742, when his sons succeeded him as Kings' Printers and lessees of the University." (Carter, 166-169)

- Baskett's first editions produced one of the more notorious printings thus far, "the Vinegar Bible."
 - "John Baskett's first Bible was also his most notorious. A contemporary account of the work in progress is of particular interest, both because such accounts are rare and because it gives so clear a sense of the printer's priorities:

We are here printing a most Magnificent English Bible, some very few Copys will be in Vellum for a Present to the Queen & my Ld Treasurer. You know Dr Wallis and Dr Gregory pronounced Mr. Dennison absolutely the best Corrector they ever met with. If this Work have not the Advantage of his nice Ey at least in giving the first Directions, and settling the Distances of Lines & Words and the great Art in a beautifull and Uniforme Division of Syllables, with several other minute Regulations, invisible to vulgar Eys, the Work will want of its proposed Splendor . . . Mr. Denison says the Fount of letters, is the very best He ever saw, and you know his Ey examines all the Tayls sides & Topps of letters &c. To do justice to Mr. Basket, He spares no Cost nor Pains. We shall throw out all the vast Numbers of References added by some late Reformers & Improvers of the Bible, reserving only those of the Original Translators themselves . . .

As printing, this was a superb book, as text it was that well-known 'Basketful of errors', the 'Vinegar Bible' (1717; H942, 943), so called from the heading to Luke 20, 'the parable of the vinegar', for 'vineyard'." (Norton, 101)



- Harold P. Scanlin is author of an essay titled "Revising the KJV: Seventeenth Through Nineteenth Century" found in *The King James Version At 400: Assessing Its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence*. In his essay Scanlin discusses the "Vinegar Bible" of Baskett.

- “1717 (Oxford, Baskett; Herbert 942, 943) Though not overtly designed to be a revised text, John Baskett published a folio edition in two volumes (Old Testament in 1717 and New Testament in 1716). It was a work of great typographical beauty, sometimes described as “the most magnificent” of the Oxford Bibles. Unfortunately, it contained many typographical errors. It is known as “The Vinegar Bible,” from an error in the heading of Luke 20, which reads “The Parable of the vinegar,” instead of “The parable of the vineyard.” It was so carelessly printed that it was once named “A Baskett-full of printers’ errors.” Baskett’s effort illustrates the difficulty in maintaining an accurate text, even by a recognized publisher who had recently acquired a patent to print Bibles.” (Scanlin, 143)
- Professor Norton also addresses the subject “the Vinegar Bible” in his other book *The King James Bible: A Short History From Tyndale To Today*:
 - “Baskett’s 1717 Oxford folio is one of the most famous KJBs of the century, grandiose to a fault (there was a complaint that a crane was needed to lift it), and eloquent of the continuing failure to attend to the text itself. Four years before the publication, Aurthur Charlett described the work in progress:

We are printing the most magnificent English Bible, some very few copies will be in vellum for a present to the Queen and my Lord Treasurer. You know Dr Wallis and Dr Gregory pronounced Mr. Denison absolutely the best corrector they ever met with. If this work have not the advantage of his eye at least in giving the first directions, and settling the distances of lines and words and the great art in beautiful and uniform division of syllables, with several other minute regulations, invisible to vulgar eyes, the work will want of its proposed splendor. . . We shall throw out all the vast numbers of references added by some late reformers and improvers of the bible, reserving only those of the original translators themselves, as believing they who were at the pains of the revision had good reasons for their references, though I fear by this omission we may incur the censure of some Right reverend, but we have been so often and so long under them as to be almost insensible of their weight.

‘Proposed splendour’ is the point: all the work described is to achieve perfection of typography. The work of the ‘corrector’ is really page design and inspection of the type: this is to be a printer’s Bible—as such its only rival in this century was John Baskerville’s Cambridge folio of 1763. The decision to revert to the 1611 margin is sensible—as is the fear about the response—but there appears to be no thought about the text.

. . . Charlett was wrong not to anticipate that this would be what the ‘Right Reverends’ would object to: textual accuracy did matter to some Bible-purchasers. William Lowth wrote to him from Winchester:

I am desired by some of my brethren here to acquaint you that the great Church Bible . . . which they lately bought for the use of our Cathedral is very falsely printed. In the two lessons upon St. Peter's Day we found two considerable mistakes . . . Finding two such faults in two successive chapters, we have reason to fear that the whole edition is faulty, and several others have been observed by those of our quire who read the daily lessons. One might expect, besides this dishonor done to religion by such careless editions of the bible, the printer should have a little consulted his own reputation and interest he has in the sale of the book, which we shall take all occasions to let them know how unfit it is for public use.

In this way, as Carter observes, 'fame has fastened on the errors: what might have been one of the glories of English printing is one of its curiosities'. It did not sell well, and the unbound price dropped from £4 [\$1,020.91] 4s to £3 [\$765.68] 5s in 1728; Carter thought it 'would not be worth much more now' but such grand curiosities in Bible printing now fetch a high price from collectors." (Norton, *A Short History*, 153-155)

- In the same piece, Lowth touched upon how the cost of Bibles was impacting the common Englishman under Baskett's monopoly structure.
 - "And I must further beg leave to take notice to you, that Mr. Baskett by reason of his Interest in the King's and University Printing House, has got the Monopoly of Bibles, and has of late raised the common bibles that used to be sold for 4s to 4s 6d., and hereby has laid a Vast Tax upon the Common People, as well as upon those that give away Bibles in Charity. Your known Concern for the Honour of Religion and the University made us give you the Trouble of this Information." (Carter, 171)
- Lowth was not the only one to complain about the price and quality of Baskett's work. Carter records the following:
 - ". . . others besides William Lowth complained of rising prices. Reporting to Charlett on a suit brought by Baskett against James Watson, who printed bibles in Edinburgh, in the House of Lords, Smallridge, Bishop of Bristol and Dean of Christ Church, wrote on 15 February 1717/18:

Council for Watson inveighed severely against Mr. Basketts endeavors to get to himself an entire Monopoly of printing Bibles, &c. and enlarged very much upon his having raised the price of 'em to an exorbitant Degree and on this Occasion several Lords, not in public Debate, but in private Conference, complain'd very much of our leasing to Him the right of Printing, which ought to have been us'd as a check against his enhancing the price of Bibles &c. I have good reason to think that unless due care be taken by the University, that the Covenant we have made against his selling these Books at an higher price than by us fixt be strictly

executed, our Privilege will be endanger'd if not from the Courts of Law, Yet from the Legislative.

The bishop was alluding to a term in Baskett's lease of 1712 providing that 'the lessees shall sell all such Books as shall be by them . . . printed within the said University at such rate and price and no other as by the Vice-Chancellor of the said University. . . shall be sett', and there was a declaration of the intent of the parties that 'the price of Bibles and more particularly of little Bibles in duodecimo or other little form [shall not be] advanced or increased'. The Courts did indeed show a growing distaste for the royal prerogative's interference with printing; and Baskett's high prices and misprints were calculated to bring the exclusion of competition from this branch of the book trade into bad odor." (Carter, 172-173)

- Carter comments on other aspects of Baskett's career as follows:
 - "Of the series of bibles printed at Oxford in Baskett's time some twelve editions in folio, quarto, octavo, and duodecimo are distinguishable, those in quarto and duodecimo being reissued from time to time with new title-pages. He gave the quantities that he was printing in 1720: octavo in Nonpareil type 10,000; duodecimo in Minion type 10,000. Besides these he printed some sixteen editions at Oxford of the Common Prayer in various formats, and he described a duodecimo New Testament in the press in 1720 as 'always printing'. The quality of the impression various with the size and the type of format: Baskett's big Oxford Bibles and Prayers are above the average standard of English printing in his day; but the little ones are so roughly printed as to be virtually unreadable.

In due time the Church or the Crown was impelled to act by general dissatisfaction with the available editions of the Scriptures. In 1724 King George I issued by way of proclamation "Directions to Printers of Bibles and Prayer-books for remedying faulty printings and regulating the prices'. He ordered that specimens for proposed editions should be deposited with the two Secretaries of State, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishop of London, and that the editions, when issued, should be as good as the specimens. As for correction, the King directed the printers 'that they shall employ such correctors of the press, and allow them such salaries, as shall be approved from time to time by the Archbishop and the Bishop of London'. Further, the patentees were instructed to print in the title-pages of their Bibles and prayer books the exact price at which they were sold to the booksellers.

Of Baskett's compliance with these regulations, it is known that for eight or nine years he printed prices at the feet of his title-pages. His folio Bible of 1727 from Oxford cost 36s in sheets, folded and quired, and his 24th bible of the same year, also unbound, 2s. He sold a duodecimo Book of Common Prayer for 2d." (Carter, 173)

- Professor Norton states the following regarding Baskett’s work after sampling editions bearing his name from 1743, 1744, 1752 and 1756.
 - “A sampling of Baskett Bibles yields few textual innovations. Three words beginning in ‘un’ took their modern form (‘untemperate’, ‘undiscreet’ and ‘unperfit/unperfect’, both of which forms had survived), *e* replaced the apostrophe in ‘shamefac’d’, and ‘wayes side’ became ‘way side’ (Luke 8:5). Three minor changes were made to readings: ‘for the press’ in place of ‘for preasse’ (Mark 2:4), ‘cast into prison’ for ‘cast in prison’ (Luke 23:19, repeating a 1616 change), and ‘but the time cometh’ for ‘the time commeth’ (John 16:25).” (Norton, 101-102)
- Carter concludes this of Baskett by stating the following:
 - “By that time Baskett had reached the age of 70. The records at Oxford and at Stationers’ Hall are silent about his remaining years, which came to an end on 22 June 1742. His son John predeceased him by a month; his other two sons, Thomas and Robert, succeeded him as King’s Printers and lessees of the Oxford Bible Press.” (Carter, 176)

Works Cited

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Eric W. Nye, Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency, accessed Monday, December 2, 2024, <https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm>.