

Sunday, November 16, 2025—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
 Lesson 267 Assessing the Printed History of the King James Text (First American Printing)

### **Introduction**

- [Lesson 266](#) continued our exploration of the printed history of the King James Bible (KJB), focusing on the 1769 Blayney revision and its legacy. Although modern editions from Oxford and Cambridge Bibles are based on Blayney's text, they contain minor, non-substantive differences. Professor David Norton, author of *A Textual History of the King James Bible* attributes these variations to commercial pressures, limited demand for textual innovation, and poor archival practices.
- A major focus of Lesson 266 was on Thomas Curtis's 1833 critique in *The Existing Monopoly*, where he accused the university presses of introducing over 11,000 intentional changes to the 1611 Authorized Version. Curtis argued that these changes compromised doctrinal clarity and theological integrity. He campaigned for a return to the original 1611 text and greater accountability in Bible publishing, even collaborating briefly with Cambridge on a collation project that was later abandoned.
- Curtis's efforts led to increased scrutiny and, ultimately, greater uniformity between Oxford and Cambridge editions. Oxford responded with a remarkable 1833 reprint of the 1611 edition, which highlighted the impracticality of fully reverting to the original due to its many quirks and inconsistencies. Norton concludes that while Curtis's concerns were partly justified, the precedent for textual revision existed from the beginning, and the Blayney text remains the de facto standard. Curtis's legacy lies in his push for transparency and standardization in the transmission of the KJB.
- Thus far our study of the printed history of the text has focused on British printings. Our survey would be incomplete without discussing the history of the text in the United States. It is to the American text that we will now turn our attention. In order to accomplish this task, we will consider the following points in this Lesson:
  - The Colonial Period
  - The First King James Bible Printed in America
- Note: All of the content used in this Lesson was taken from my book, [\*The King James Bible In America: An Orthographic, Historical and Textual Investigation\*](#) published by Dispensational Publishing House in 2019.

### **The Colonial Period**

- Prior to the American Revolution, the colonies were supplied with Bibles in the English language from their mother country Great Britain. Colonial publishers are represented as possessing the impression that, if they reprinted the work, they would be guilty of an infringement of the

exclusive right possessed by certain parties in England and thereby expose themselves to prosecution [For a full discussion of the Crown Copyright see [Lesson 187](#)]. (O’Callaghan, v)

- Margaret T. Hills, author of *The English Bible in America*, reports that “a very real obstacle [to printing the KJB in America] was the Crown monopoly restricting the publication of the King James Bible to the King’s printers.” (Hills, xv)
- Likewise, English Bible historian Paul C. Gutjahr states that
  - “the story of publishing the English Bible in America finds its roots in the American Revolution. . . Because of the royal copyright [note the misuse of this term copyright], American printers had never seriously concerned themselves with producing their own English Bibles until political events forced the issue.” (Gutjahr, 20)
- While the Crown’s monopoly constituted the greatest political/legal obstacle in terms of printing the KJB in the colonies, there were other practical and/or logistical concerns as well. First, copies from their mother country were abundant, cheap, and of higher quality than any of the colonial printers had the capacity to produce. There is strong historical evidence to suggest that, at one point between the 1690s and 1720s, the price for a Common English Bible (i.e., KJB) fell to one shilling. (O’Callaghan, v. See the footnote.)
- When one factors in the costs associated with typesetting and printing the entire Bible, there is no way any colonial publisher could have competed against such a price. Second, publishers printing books with the length of the Bible for the first time would typically do so in serial form by subscription over a prolonged period of time. However, the difficulty in securing enough subscriptions to justify the cost of typesetting the text, not to mention printing, caused these projects to not come to fruition.
- Allegedly, in 1752, Kneeland & Green of Boston printed an edition of the English Bible in a small quarto size. (Herbert, 272) This unconfirmed edition is also known as the Mark Baskett Bible of 1752. Based on that fact, this edition is rumored to have borne the London imprint of the King’s printer Mark Baskett. Regarding this mythical edition, O’Callaghan states:
  - “It was carried through the press as privately as possible, and had the London imprint of the copy from which it was reprinted viz: “London: Printed by Mark Baskett, Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty,” in order to prevent prosecution from those, in England and Scotland, who published the Bible by a patent from the Crown; or Cum privilegio, as did the English Universities at Oxford and Cambridge.” (O’Callaghan, xiii)
- This particular edition remains shrouded in mystery as no known copy could be located by O’Callaghan or anyone else since 1860. (Herbert, 272) Despite its unconfirmed existence, its legend includes information regarding the forging of the insignia of the King’s printer, which speaks to the fact that colonial printers did not dare challenge the Crown’s patent on Bible printing. Margaret T. Hills, in her 1961 book *The English Bible in America* written 100 years after

O'Callaghan's (1861), also has a discussion on the "Boston Basket Bible" in which she concludes similar to O'Callaghan that there is no historical proof that the Bible ever existed (See pages xv and xvi).

- Thus, one passes through the entire colonial history of the American colonies without confronting a single English Bible printed in the new world. One does encounter, however, a few non-English Bibles printed in the colonies such as John Eliot's 1663 Algonquin Translation as well as his 1708 Gospel of John published at Boston in both Algonquin and English. (O'Callaghan, vi) Moreover, German immigrant Christopher Saur commenced printing the Bible in German in 1740 and finished his task in 1743. After Saur died in 1758, his son printed two thousand copies in 1763 and another three thousand copies on the eve of war in 1776. When the war began, much of the latter printing was seized and used as cartridge paper or litter for horses. Saur's daughter succeeded, however, in rescuing the sheets of ten complete copies which she caused to be bound. (O'Callaghan, xiii) The Declaration of Independence and the crucible of war would prove to be prerequisites to seeing the KJB printed on American shores.

### **The First King James Bible Printed in America**

- With the opening of the War of Independence, the colonies found themselves cut off from the supply of English Bibles from Great Britain.
  - "By 1777, bibles for sale in America had become scarce. The war with Britain had stopped much of the colonies' international trade, and among the items temporarily lost to the American market place was the English Bible." (Gutjahr, 20)
- Sensing the impending shortage of Bibles, a group of Presbyterian clergyman petitioned the Continental Congress in the summer of 1777 that Bibles be produced on American shores to combat their scarcity and correspondingly high price. Congress responded by calling for bids from various printers. Five Philadelphia printers offered estimates that varied greatly in terms of time, type face, and paper. (Gutjahr, 20)
- The entry from the *Journal of the Continental Congress* from Thursday, September 11, 1777 records the findings of the Congress with respect to this petition. It reads in part:
  - "... they have conferred fully with the printers, &c. in this city, and are of opinion, that the proper types for printing the Bible are not to be had in this country, and that the paper cannot be procured, but with such difficulties and subject to such casualties, as render any dependence on it altogether improper: that to import types for the purpose of setting up an entire edition of the bible, and to strike off 30,000 copies, with paper, binding, &c. will cost £10,272 10, which must be advanced by Congress, to be reimbursed by the sale of the books: that in the opinion of the Committee considerable difficulties will attend the procuring the types and paper; that, afterwards, the risque of importing them will considerably enhance the cost, and that the calculations are subject to such uncertainty in the present state of affairs, that Congress cannot much rely on them. . ." (733-734)

- After considering the bids, the Congress decided that it would be much cheaper and reliable to simply import Bibles, and so they decided to attempt to procure 20,000 Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere in Europe. (Gutjahr, 20)
  - “. . . that the use of the Bible is so universal, and its importance so great, that your committee refer the above to the consideration of Congress, and if Congress shall not think it expedient to order the importation of types and paper, your committee recommend that Congress will order the Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere, into the different ports of the states in the Union.

Whereupon, the Congress was moved, to order the Committee of Commerce to import twenty thousand copies of the Bible.” (*Journals*, 734)

- Regarding this resolution to import Bibles from elsewhere in Europe, historian Paul C. Gutjahr reports that:
  - “No action was ever taken on this decision, for soon after it was made, the Congress had to flee Philadelphia. This petition for bibles . . . faded into the background forever as the Congress found itself with the more pressing concerns of war.” (Gutjahr, 20)
- It was Robert Aitken from Scotland, one of the five printers who submitted a bid to Congress for an American printing of the English Bible who braved the uncertainties of war to produce the first English New Testament in the New World. Aitken, who was also Congress’ official printer publishing the *Congressional Journal*, did not let the decision to import Bibles from Europe stop him from pursuing the enterprise. Given the fact that it required substantially less work and resources to print the New Testament when compared with the entire Bible, Aitken limited his work accordingly. In 1777, he published the first English New Testament ever printed in the colonies. Aitken’s risk paid off and was met with great successes, so much so that he produced editions of his New Testament in 1778, 1779, 1780, and 1781. Thus, began the printing of the KJB in what would soon become the United States of American.
- In a petition dated January 21, 1781, Robert Aitken announced to the Continental Congress that he had undertaken to print an edition of the entire Bible. On Thursday, September 12, 1782 the Congressional Committee assigned oversight on the “Aitken Memorial;” and gave the following update on Aitken’s progress and product:
  - “That Mr. Aitken has at great expense now finished an American edition of the Holy Scriptures in English; that the Committee have, from time to time, attended to his progress in the Work; that they also recommended it to the Two Chaplains of Congress to examine and give their opinion of the execution, who have accordingly reported thereon, the recommendation and report being as follows:

Philadelphia, 1 September, 1782.

Rev. Gentlemen, Our knowledge of your piety and public spirit leads us without apology to recommend to your particular attention the edition of the holy scriptures publishing by Mr. Aitken. He undertook this expensive work at a time, when from the circumstances of the war, an English edition of the Bible could not be imported, nor any opinion formed how long the obstruction might continue. On this account particularly he deserves applause and encouragement. We therefore wish you, reverend gentlemen, to examine the execution of the work, and if approved, to give it the sanction of your judgment and the weight of your recommendation. We are with very great respect, your most obedient humble servants,

(Signed) James Duane, Chairman,

In behalf of a committee of Congress on Mr. Aitken's memorial. Rev. Dr. White and Rev. Mr. Duffield, chaplains of the United States in Congress assembled. REPORT.

Gentlemen, Agreeably to your desire, we have paid attention to Mr. Robert Aitken's impression of the holy scriptures, of the old and new testament. Having selected and examined a variety of passages throughout the work, we are of opinion, that it is executed with great accuracy as to the sense, and with as few grammatical and typographical errors as could be expected in an undertaking of such magnitude. Being ourselves witnesses of the demand for this invaluable book, we rejoice in the present prospect of a supply, hoping that it will prove as advantageous as it is honorable to the gentleman, who has exerted himself to furnish it at the evident risk of private fortune. We are, gentlemen, your very respectful and humble servants,

(Signed) William White,

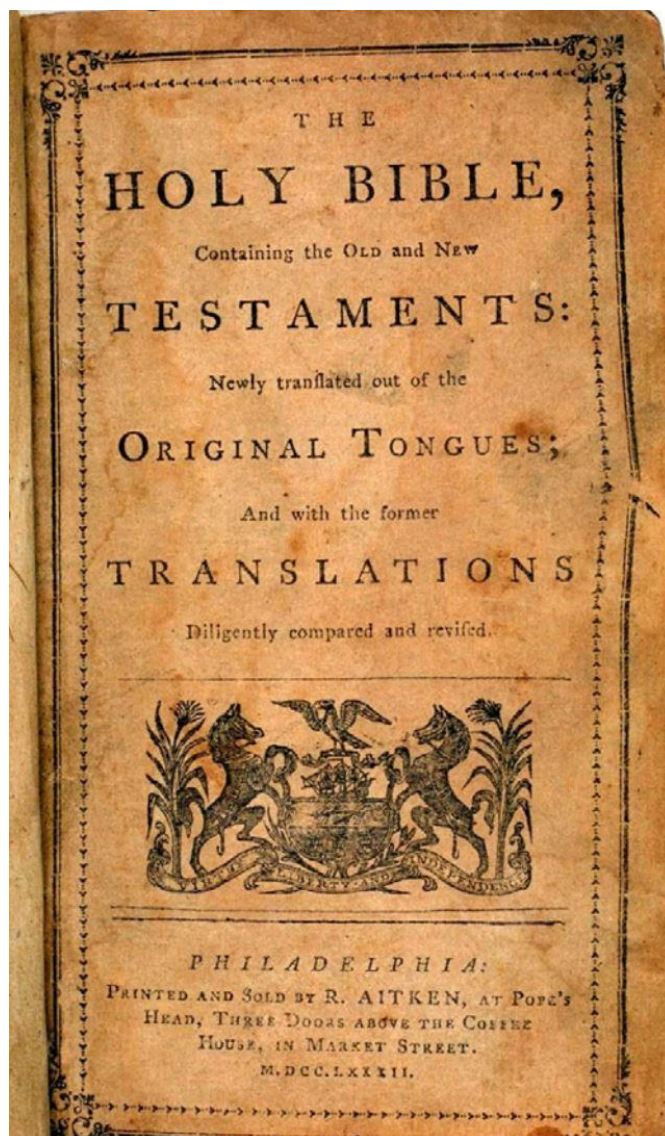
George Duffield.

Philadelphia, September 10, 1782.

Hon. James Duane, esq. chairman, and the other hon. gentlemen of the committee of Congress on Mr. Aitken's memorial.

Whereupon, Resolved, That the United States in Congress assembled, highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the interest of religion as well as an instance of the progress of arts in this country, and being satisfied from the above report, of his care and accuracy in the execution of the work, they recommend this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States, and hereby authorise him to publish this recommendation in the manner he shall think proper." (*Journals of The American Congress From 1774 to 1788*, Vol. IV., 75-76)

- Aitken's Bible of 1782 was the first Bible printed in this country in the English language having an American imprint. The report and resolution of the Committee quoted above was reproduced inside Aitken's Bible following the title page but before the Table of Contents for the Old and New Testaments. (O'Callaghan, xxiii)



BY THE UNITED STATES IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED :

September 12th, 1782.

*THE* Committee to whom was referred a Memorial of Robert Aitken, Printer, dated 21st January, 1781, respecting an edition of the Holy Scriptures, report, " That Mr. Aitken has, at a great expence, now finished an American edition of the Holy Scriptures in English ; that the Committee have from time to time attended to his progress in the work ; that they also recommended it to the two Chaplains of Congress to examine and give their opinion of the execution, who have accordingly reported thereon ; the recommendation and report being as follows :

" Philadelphia, 1st September, 1782.

" Reverend Gentlemen,

" OUR knowledge of your piety and public spirit leads us without apology to recommend to your particular attention the edition of the Holy Scriptures publishing by Mr. Aitken. He undertook this expensive work at a time when, from the circumstances of the war, an English edition of the Bible could not be imported, nor any opinion formed how long the obstruction might continue. On this account particularly he deserves applause and encouragement. We therefore wish you, Reverend Gentlemen, to examine the execution of the work, and if approved, to give it the sanction of your judgment, and the weight of your recommendation. We are, with very great respect,

Your most obedient humble servants.

(Sign'd)

JAMES DUANE, Chairman in behalf  
of a Committee of Congress on Mr. Aitken's Memorial.

Reverend Doct. White and Revd. Mr. Duffield,  
Chaplains of the United States in Congress assembled.

Report.

Gentlemen,

AGREEABLY to your desire we have paid attention to Mr. Robert Aitken's impression of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Having selected and examined a variety of passages throughout the work, we are of opinion that it is executed with great accuracy as to the sense, and with as few grammatical and typographical errors as could be expected in an undertaking of such magnitude. Being ourselves witnesses of the demand for this invaluable book, we rejoice in the present prospect of a supply ; hoping that it will prove as advantageous



as it is honorable to the Gentleman, who has exerted himself to furnish it, at the evident risque of private fortune. We are, Gentlemen,  
 Your very respectful and humble servants,  
 (Sign'd) WILLIAM WHITE,  
 GEORGE DUFFIELD.  
 Philadelphia, September 10th, 1782.  
 Honble James Duane, Esq. Chairman, and the other  
 Honble Gentlemen of the Committee of Congress on  
 Mr. Aitken's Memorial."  
 Whereupon,  
 RESOLVED,  
 THAT the United States in Congress assembled highly approve the  
 pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the  
 interest of religion, as well as an instance of the progress of arts in this  
 country, and being satisfied from the above report of his care and accu-  
 racy in the execution of the work, they recommend this edition of the Bi-  
 ble to the inhabitants of the United States, and hereby authorise him to  
 publish this Recommendation in the manner he shall think proper.  
 CHA. THOMSON, Sec'ry.

- Textually, Aitken's Bible does not conform to the standard King James Oxford Text of 1769 edited by Blayney. When compared against the eight readings identified in [Lesson 265](#), Aitken's Bible represents a slightly different form of the text than the one published by Oxford in 1769. Currently Aitken's exact exemplar is unknown.

Joshuah 19:2

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

2 And <sup>b</sup> they had in their inheritance  
 Beer-sheba, Sheba, and Moladah,

1782 Aitken (M11)

2 And they had in their inhe-  
 ritage, Beer-shebah, and Sheba,  
 and Moladah,

- Aitken's reading "and Sheba" differs from both the 1611's "or Sheba" and the 1769's "Sheba."



*II Chronicles 33:19*

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

19 His prayer also, and *how* God was intreated of him, and all his sins, and his trespasss, and the places wherein he built high places, and set up groves and graven images, before he was humbled: behold, they *are* written among the sayings of || the seers.

1782 Aitken (M11)

19 His prayer also, and *how* God was intreated of him, and all his sin, and his trespasss, and the places wherein he built high places, and set up groves and graven images before he was humbled; behold, they *are* written among the sayings of the seers.

*Job 30:6*

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

6 To dwell in the cliffs of the valleys, in  
+ caves of the earth, and in the rocks.

1782 Aitken (M11)

6 To dwell in the clifts of the  
valleys, in caves of the earth, and  
in the rocks.

*Psalms 148:8*

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

8 Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours;  
stormy wind fulfilling his word:

1782 Aitken (M11)

8 Fire and hail, snow and va-  
pour, stormy wind fulfilling his  
word:

*Nahum 3:16*

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

16 Thou hast multiplied thy merchants  
above the stars of heaven : the cankerworm  
|| spoileth, and fleeth away.

1782 Aitken (M11)

16 Thou hast multiplied thy  
merchants above the stars of hea-  
ven : the canker-worm spoileth  
and fieth away.

*Zechariah 11:2*

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

2 Howl, fir tree ; for the cedar is fallen ;  
because the || mighty is spoiled : howl, O  
ye oaks of Bashan ; for || the forest of the  
vintage is come down.

1782 Aitken (M11)

2 Howl, fir-tree, for the cedar  
is fallen ; because the mighty are  
spoiled : howl, O ye oaks of Ba-  
shan, for the forest of the vintage  
is come down.

Matthew 26:39

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

39 And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and 'prayed, saying, " O my Father, if it be possible, " let this cup pass from me: nevertheless " not as I will, but as thou *wilt*.

1782 Aitken (M11)

39 And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou *wilt*.

John 14:6

1769 Oxford Folio (H1194)

6 Jesus saith unto him, I am " the way, and ' the truth, and " the life: " no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

1782 Aitken (M11)

6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me.

- So, Aitken's Bible from 1782 is not an identical match to Blayney's 1769 text. As noted above, the exact exemplar used by Aitken to create the inaugural American printing remains unknown at this time.
- Dr. Laurence M. Vance discusses the Aitken Bible in Chapter 3 in a subsection titled "American Bibles" in his recently published book *The Text of the King James Bible*. Dr. Vance states the following regarding the textual basis for Aitken's Bible.
  - "His Bible contains a haphazard mixture of Cambridge and Oxford readings. For example, "rasor" is used in five places (Num. 6:5; Jud. 16:17; 1 Sam. 1:11; Psa. 52:2; Eze. 5:1), but "razor" in two places (Jud. 13:5; Isa. 7:20); "their's" (Jos. 21:10) and "your's" (2 Chr. 20:15) only have an apostrophe one time while "her's" has an apostrophe throughout except in Deuteronomy 21:15; in Joshua 19:19, "Hapharaim" follows the Cambridge spelling but "Shihon" follows the Oxford spelling; and the Cambridge spelling of names of the names in 1 Chronicles is followed five times (2:27, 7:1, 19, 27, 24:11) while the Oxford spelling is followed six times (1:38, 2:49, 55, 5:11, 13:5, 23:20). Additionally, "stablish" is spelled "establish" in four places (2 Sam. 7:13; 2 Chr. 7:18; Est. 9:21; 1 Thes. 3:13); a hyphen is added to "men-children" (Exo. 34:23), "house-tops" (2 Kgs. 19:26), and "gray-headed" (Psa. 71:18), but removed from "Malchishua" (1 Sam. 31:2); and "the" is printed as "thy" in I Timothy 4:16, following Aitken's first New Testament and the Cambridge 1629 edition." (Vance, 233)
- So according to Vance, the Aitken text represents a mixed text containing both Oxford and Cambridge readings as well as mixed spellings. Therefore, from the first printing of the text in the United States, differences in orthography i.e., spelling were already present. As we will see in future Lessons, these differences in spelling between British and American editions would grow as the text continued to be printed in the United States.
- Since stablish/establish is often discussed as an example of corruption in modern printings of the KJB, I would like to look at occurrences of that change as a case study. Vance notes that four times "establish" was used by Aitken instead of "stablish."



## II Samuel 7:13

13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will establisth the throne of his kingdom for ever.

## II Chronicles 7:18

18 Then will I establisth the throne of thy kingdom, according as I have covenanted with David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man *to be* ruler in Israel.

## Esther 9:21

21 To establisth *this* among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month  
E c 5 Adar,

## I Thessalonians 3:13

13 To the end he may establisth your hearts unblameable in holiness before God even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

- If one is going to insist that the word must be spelled “stablish” in these four verses to have the “pure” word of God, they must, of logical necessity, conclude the first KJB published on American shores was a corruption on account of its spelling differences with British printings. I see no reason to draw such a conclusion. The KJB was never printed with uniformity on American shores, I can see no positive or practical reason to adopt rhetoric that logically leads to



the falsification of millions of editions of the KJB simply because they differ in spelling from British printings.

- Before moving on, it seems prudent to pause to appreciate the magnitude of Aitken's accomplishment given the fact that it was the first complete KJB printed in America. Aitken committed himself to setting and proofing type for nearly two thousand pages of text. Moreover, he somehow acquired a necessary amount of paper at a time when paper had to be made by hand or imported from Europe. In appearance, Aitken's Bible was bound in both one and two volume printings in simple calf skin along with some gold-tooled ornamentation. It is also significant to note that Aitken moved away from the common subscriptions sales strategy to a method that involved other booksellers selling his product. He sold or traded copies of his Bible to other printers and store owners who turned around and sold his volume in their shops. Given the astronomical expense associated with printing 10,000 complete Bibles under those conditions, Aitken sought to offset his product costs by securing a loan from the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the written endorsement of the Continental Congress found in the Preface to his edition and quoted above. (Gutjahr, 21)
- Despite Aitken's due diligence, his timing proved tragic. Almost immediately after the publication of the work, peace was proclaimed with Great Britain. (O'Callaghan, xxiii) Imported Bibles began to flow again into America shores with the end of the Revolution. "As it turned out, English publishers could undersell the price of Aitken's Bible and surpass it in terms of quality, because of the long practice of English publishers and their access to better raw materials." (Gutjahr, 21-22) Desiring to avoid complete financial ruin, Aitken petitioned Congress to purchase a portion of his stock to reduce his financial losses. In addition, he approached George Washington with the idea of giving one of his Bibles to every veteran of the American Revolution; in the end, neither idea was accepted. (Gutjahr, 23) In an act of charity, the Philadelphia Synod of the Presbyterian Church agreed to purchase Aitken's Bibles and distribute them among the poor.
  - "Resolved, as Mr. Aitken from laudable motives, and with great expense, hath undertaken and executed an elegant impression of the Holy Scriptures, which on account of the importation of Bibles from Europe, will be very injurious to his temporal circumstances, the Synod agree that the Committee to purchase Bibles for distribution among the Poor, purchase Aitken's Bibles and no other, and earnestly recommend it to all to purchase such in preference to any other." (O'Callaghan, xxiii)
- Robert Aitken remained in the printing trade until his death in 1802 but never fully recovered financially. There are fifty extant copies of his complete Bible from 1782 that are known to Bible historians.

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