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Dunham Bible Museum

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Avery Family Bible

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The Avery Bible: The Hearts of Children to Their Fathers

## The Avery Bible: The Hearts of Children to Their Fathers

At a time when Marie Kondo and minimalism determine what is worthwhile to save and remember, family antiques are labeled as clutter to be tossed or nuisances to be ignored. Old books, especially, seem to grace the bookshelves of family rooms less and less. This is a sad fate, for old books tell stories that we should be reminded of regularly. A book tells a story within its pages, but it can also tell the stories of its creator and of its owner. In the Dunham Bible Museum, an old, simple, leather-bound Bible called the Avery Bible rests in quietness. But if we ask a few questions and seek to remember, this book will revive its compelling stories about the families who published and owned it. The Avery Bible came from the longstanding printing company of the Barker family, but more significantly, this book points to the devotion and perseverance of its owners, the Avery family, who have passed down their treasured volume through twelve generations.

Within the aged leaves of the Avery Bible, a decorative title page introduces the New Testament, and in small print, this page tells the name of its printer, Christopher Barker. Living in the late sixteenth century, Barker was the official publisher for Queen Elizabeth I and held the printing patent for all Geneva Bibles. Protestants especially cherished the Geneva Bible, since its publication represented a separation from the Catholic Church's solely Latin Bible translations. Barker "obtained a license," and in 1576 he "printed the Genevan Testament under his own name" (Lupton VI.74). He published many more editions in the years to come, including the 1581 version that the Averys acquired. To show that Queen Elizabeth sanctioned Barker's publication, each Geneva Bible bears the Royal arms in the decorative border of its New Testament title page, as seen in the Avery Bible (Lupton VII.56). Barker remained the

Queen's printer until his death in 1599, when his son Robert then took up the reins and continued the Barker publishing company for almost fifty years, ensuring the addition of his own name to the pages of history.

After the New Testament title page and right before the book of Matthew, the Avery Bible holds a page filled from top to bottom with names, all written by hand. At the top, the faded ink of a quill pen forms the letters, whereas the blue lines of a ballpoint reveal the names at the bottom. This time-worn list is an account of the former owners of the Avery Bible, beginning with the patriarch Captain Christopher Avery, born in 1590, and ending with William H. Avery Jr., born in 1903. William was the eleventh generation removed from Christopher and is only one generation before the present owners of the Bible, Nancy Pressler and her two brothers. During Christopher Avery's time, families often recorded their own genealogy between the last verse of Malachi, which mentions fathers and children, and the first chapter of Mathew, which begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Seeing the generations before Jesus helps to illuminate Christ the man, and similarly, looking back at the first owners of the Avery Bible gives a glimpse of the dedication that marked this family.

The legacy began with Christopher Avery who was born in Devon, England, and later traveled to America with his young son, James. The 1581 Geneva Bible was published before Christopher's birth in 1590, so Christopher most likely acquired the volume from a family member in Devon (Taylor, 54). In 1616, he married Margery Stephens, who bore James in 1620, but she died only a few years later. When James was older, Christopher and his son decided to leave Devon for America. The reason for their trans-Atlantic move was unclear, and "emigrating to New England...was a brave undertaking and one that would test the family" (Taylor, p.12). The Avery family was tested, because Christopher's second wife, Alice, did not accompany her

husband and step-son but remained in England the rest of her life. It is speculated that Christopher and his son sailed on the *Arabella* with John Winthrop in 1630. However, there is no mention of their names in the *Arabella* documents, so “it is more likely that they immigrated later, around 1642,” when James was about twenty-one (Taylor, p.17). With a Bible in hand, a lone father and his growing son traveled to new beginnings.

In America, both father and son served as community leaders, and James became the Avery patriarch as he built a community and home for his family. When Christopher and James first arrived, wilderness shaded the northern coastline, and the “communities in New England were at most twenty years old” (Taylor 13). While the father and son started together in Gloucester, Massachusetts, their paths drifted apart over time. Christopher later settled in the developed Boston community, while James forged ahead with his own growing family to the newly-founded New London, Connecticut. James bought land on the outskirts of New London and founded the town Groton where he and his wife, Joanna Greenslade, raised eleven children.

Both in New London and Groton, James proved to be a valuable member of society. He served as deputy, magistrate, and judge for over twenty years, laboring to nurture a peaceful and fruitful community (Taylor 32). With a committee, James arranged the ordination of the first minister for the first church in Groton. In 1675 he served as commander of the United Army during King Philip’s War. James also built close relationships with friendly Pequot tribes in his area. In his family, in his community, and among different people groups, James worked tirelessly to establish the lasting qualities of a free homeland.

James’s presence in history and his numerous progeny laid the foundation for a lasting Avery legacy of stories, landmarks, and of course, the Avery Bible. James built a large two-story home in Groton where his many children grew up. Nicknamed “the Hive,” the house was

occupied by Averys for two hundred and thirty-eight years until it was burned down in 1894. Yet astonishingly, the Avery Bible has remained intact and in the family for over three hundred and fifty years. The Avery descendants have preserved the Bible with great care, and the Bible has preserved a bridge for the new Averys to visit the old.

The Averys hold a refreshingly deep and clear connection to the past that fosters gratitude for ancestors who sacrificed for family and that nurtures true motives for one's life today. Malachi says to remember so that you will trust Christ, who "will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Memories orient us to meditate on the restoration that Christ will bring of eternal family and belonging.

## Bibliography

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