Terry Wolever (Comp. and Ed.)


One of the most famous portraits of English Baptist luminaries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries depicts fifteen of them standing behind or seated in front of a table with Robert Hall, Jr. (1764–1831) looming large in the middle of the Victorian picture. Hall, Bible in hand, is depicted as the way he was remembered throughout the Victorian era as a preacher par excellence. It is interesting that one of Hall’s key theological opponents in certain areas of Baptist thinking is also in the picture: seated in front of the table is Joseph Kinghorn (1766–1832) of Norwich. Today, Kinghorn is all but forgotten, but his own day obviously regarded him as an important figure on the Baptist landscape—hence his place in this portrait of key Baptist worthies.

Thankfully, we now have more than this oft-reproduced portrait to understand the role that Kinghorn of Norwich played in the Baptist world of his day. These three volumes, collated by the independent Baptist historian Terry Wolever, contain the majority of Kinghorn’s known works as well as the only major biography of Kinghorn, *Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich: A Memoir* (1855) by Martin Hood Wilkin, the son of a close friend, which has been long out of print. This biography, along with two funeral sermons preached at the time of Kinghorn’s death, form the bulk of volume 1. The other two volumes contain most of Kinghorn’s published works—sermons, tracts, book reviews, and assorted letters. His major defences of closed communion—the key area where he found himself in opposition to the open communionist Robert Hall—do not appear in these volumes, but are to be published separately in two future volumes.

Kinghorn grew up in the home of a Calvinistic Baptist pastor, David Kinghorn (d. 1822), but unlike the father, with whom he had a very close friendship, the son had the benefit of a formal theological education at Bristol Baptist Academy from 1784 to 1787. It was at Bristol that he first met Robert Hall, who was his tutor and later theological opponent. Nearly two years after graduation, he was called to be the pastor of St Mary’s Baptist Church in Norwich: he was but 23. The rest of his ministry would be intertwined with this church and this city.

When Caleb Evans, the principal of the Bristol Academy, wrote a letter of recommendation for Kinghorn to the leadership at Norwich, he underlined the fact that “he is a sound scholar, an able, though not what may be called a brilliant preacher.” Evans further observed: “I know him to be a young man
of sterling worth and piety; and I have no doubt but he will be found to increase, wherever he goes, in graces, and gifts, and real usefulness" (1:137). Evans could not have been more prescient. Alexander Gordon, who wrote the nineteenth-century Dictionary of National Biography entry on Kinghorn, noted that he became “famed for the unction of his preaching, and his power of apt illustration,” thus disproving Evans’ early judgment about his preaching.

The Particular Baptist denomination in England as a whole also appreciated his ministry. There would have been few Particular Baptists in his day that had as firm a grasp of Greek, Hebrew, and rabbinic studies as Kinghorn did, though he confessed that “learning languages is dry work” (a remark he made with regard to learning Syriac—1:260). Not surprisingly, he was twice asked to head up a Baptist seminary: first, in 1804 with regard to Horton College in Yorkshire (1:301–311), and then, six years later, with regard to the Baptist Academy at Stepney, which later became Regent’s Park College (1:328–330 and 3:339–374). Although Kinghorn was deeply convinced of the necessity of formal theological education (see his sermons to ministerial students in 2:349–391 and 3:33–40), he also had a very clear recognition of his call to the pastorate of St. Mary’s and hence refused to leave Norwich.

His theology was very similar to that of his more well-known co-religionist, Andrew Fuller, whose theological acumen and piety he deeply respected (1:318). Both men were committed to closed communion (Kinghorn became the champion of this perspective after the death of Fuller in 1815); both were ardent in freely offering the gospel to the unconverted (for a letter of Fuller to Kinghorn, see 3:304–306, in which Fuller appealed for Kinghorn’s support of the Baptist Missionary Society); and both were ardent Trinitarians who defended the gospel in print against the attacks of Socinianism, the fastest growing form of heterodoxy in the British Isles during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see, in this regard, Kinghorn’s treatises on the deity of Christ, 2:395–348).

Kinghorn had his questions about some aspects of Fuller’s theology (see 1:312–322), but his overall commitment to the shape of Fullerism prevented him and his congregation from joining the local Suffolk and Norfolk Association. It is noteworthy that throughout Kinghorn’s long pastorate, St. Mary’s did not formally belong to any association of churches. The Suffolk and Norfolk Association actually published a significant attack on Fuller and his theological principles in 1807. The attack, A Testimony in Favour of the Principles Maintained by the Suffolk and Norfolk Association of Particular Baptist Churches, of the Doctrines of Grace, is helpfully reproduced in the third volume as an appendix (3:307–336). In it, Fuller’s views about faith as a moral duty and the nature of the atonement are wrongly rejected as Arminian (3:321–322, 328–332). Kinghorn