

Correcting the Misuse of the Bible

The True Unfolding of Biblical Revelation⁵ Attempts to support the American death penalty with the Bible almost always rest upon the use of selective verses or portions of biblical verses taken in isolation. A clear reading of the Bible from beginning to end reveals a very different picture.

REVEALS GOD'S APPROACH IN HOW GOD DEALS WITH CAIN:
PROHIBITS RETALIATORY VIOLENCE BY HUMAN BEINGS

GEN. 4:15

LAMECH MOVES THE PEOPLE TO THE LAW OF THE CLAN:
ESCALATING RETALIATORY VIOLENCE BY HUMAN BEINGS⁶

GEN. 4:23-24

MOSES MOVES THE PEOPLE BACK TOWARDS WHERE GOD STARTED:
SEVERELY LIMITING RETALIATORY VIOLENCE BY HUMAN BEINGS

EX. 21:23-25; LEV. 24:17, 19-21; DEUT. 19:21

HOSEA ANNOUNCES TO THE PEOPLE THAT GOD DESIRES MERCY AND
OBEDIENCE: NOT SACRIFICES (LIKE CAPITAL PUNISHMENT)

HOSEA 6:6

For those who accept the Christian scriptures, the unfolding biblical revelation continues to a definitive conclusion:

JESUS CHRIST RETURNS THE PEOPLE TO WHERE GOD STARTED:
NO RETALIATORY VIOLENCE BY HUMAN BEINGS

MATTHEW 5:17, 38-40

JESUS CHRIST WARNS PILATE ABOUT THE SINFULNESS OF
EXECUTING THE INNOCENT

JOHN 19:10-11

PAUL EXHORTS THE PEOPLE TO STAY ON TRACK
(LEST THEY FALL BACK INTO THE ERROR OF LAMECH):
VENGEANCE BELONGS TO GOD ALONE

ROMANS 12:19, 21

⁵ *The Biblical Truth*, at pp. 37-81.

⁶ Lamech is also the person who introduced polygamy to the Bible.

1. The Misuse of the *Mosaic Law*

Some attempt to use the “eye for eye, life for life” quotes from the *Mosaic Law* to justify American capital punishment. They overlook the fact that no serious person of biblical faith would argue that we should be cutting off hands, feet, or limbs, burning people, or poking out their eyes as criminal punishment. Nor do they deal with the thirty or more offenses (besides murder) which are punishable with death under the *Mosaic Law*—including talking back to one's parents and working or shopping on the Sabbath.

2. The Misuse of the *Rule of Blood*

Some of biblical faith attempt to justify the American death penalty by the verse in *Genesis* 9:6, the so-called *Rule of Blood*: “Whoever shed the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” *New International Version* This verse is included in God's blessing of Noah and his family. (Gen. 9:1-7).

The death penalty proponents assert that the *Rule of Blood* is God's command that the entire world must use the death penalty. There are some major problems with that attempt. *First*, such attempts are limited to first-degree murder. There is no basis for this limitation in the text itself which, if read as a command, seems to cover all taking of human life: accidents, negligent homicide, even self-defense. *Second*, such attempts have not explained why other portions of the blessing do not also continue to be binding as law: e.g., the prohibition on consumption of rare meat, or the statement that any animal which kills a human must be executed.

Finally, if the *Rule of Blood* is indeed God's command, God's perfect will, then it is God's desire that anyone who kills another human being must be executed. God would apply this uniformly because God is infinitely just. Consequently, a prominent first-degree, premeditated murderer after the blessing of Noah's family but before the handing down of the Mosaic Law would have to be executed. What does the Bible report as God's punishment for the most significant and prominent first-degree murderer during that period, under the *Rule of Blood*?

That person in the Bible is none other than Moses. And God deals with Moses the same way God dealt with Cain. Banishment from society. Our modern term for such punishment is prison.

3. The Misuse of Romans 13

Some Christians of biblical faith argue that *Paul's Epistle to the Romans* 13:3-4 confirms God's mandate for capital punishment: "But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for (government) beareth not the sword in vain: for (government) is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." *Authorized King James Version*.

The two critical words in such Christian support for the death penalty are *sword* and *execute*. If government bears the *sword* as God's minister to *execute* offenders, it sounds like scriptural support for capital punishment.

There are distinctly different Greek words that translate into English as *sword*. *RHOMPHAIA* means a saber, a long and broad cutlass. This is the instrument used for decapitation, capital punishment by sword. *MACHAIRA*, the word used in Romans 13:4, means a short sword worn on the belt, a *dagger*. This is not the instrument used for decapitation, but was used as a metaphor for the authority of the courts to inflict punishment in general.

Also, the word *execute* is not in the original Greek scriptures. The word *execute* has been inserted by the translator into the *Authorized King James Version* to provide a verb so the sentence makes sense in English. The Greek original does not have this verb. The English translation uses it as a synonym for *bring* or *inflict*. Now the verse in Romans 13:4 makes complete sense. A synonym would be: *But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for government beareth not the power of judicial punishment in vain: for it is the minister of God, a revenger to carry out wrath upon him that doeth evil.*

The verse contains no mandate for the death penalty, but supports the power of judicial authority to impose punishment for crimes.

4. The Inevitable Biblical Conclusion on the American Death Penalty: Abolition

Clearly, people of Biblical faith cannot support the American death penalty based upon biblical truth. Their support would be standing solely on a secular legal right to naked vengeance. Yet, for persons of biblical faith, vengeance is not available. That is only God's prerogative. Consequently, since they cannot support the American death penalty based upon biblical truth, then they should not support the American death penalty at all. The faith conclusion must be abolition of the American death penalty.

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MISUSE OF THE BIBLE IN ATTEMPTS TO SUPPORT THE AMERICAN DEATH PENALTY

The role of the Bible in the history, existence and execution of the American death penalty is both insidious and pervasive.¹ A case decided by the Colorado Supreme Court, *People v. Harlan*, addressed the fact that jurors can be influenced to impose death sentences based upon the reading of Bible quotes during deliberations. That is only a small part of the story. Prosecutors in America have been using Bible quotes to obtain death sentences from juries for years. "There is no indication that the instances of this practice are decreasing. The most popular scripture quotes to be used by prosecutors are those involving vengeance as justice."²

For example: quotations of "eye for an eye"; the verse from *Exodus* 21:12, "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall surely be put to death"; the so-called *Rule of Blood* in *Genesis* 9:6, "[who] so sheddeth a man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed"; the quote from *Numbers* 35:16, "the murderer shall [surely] be put to death"; and other arguments usually involving statements that purportedly support the government's right to take life based on an interpretation of *Romans* 13.

The modern American death penalty is a Bible-belt phenomenon. The Bible-belt consists of those states which are predominantly Baptist, virtually synonymous with the eleven Confederate States plus Oklahoma and the four Border States, all of which allowed legal slavery. Slavery was justified by so-called biblical support. Now the Bible-belt has held over 85% of the 1,419 state executions in the US since 1976.³ Above and beyond that, the Bible-belt has hosted all twenty-two of the U.S. juvenile executions that have taken place since 1976.⁴

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¹ See, Recinella, Dale S., *The Biblical Truth about America's Death Penalty* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), referred to as *The Biblical Truth*. © 2004 Dale S. Recinella. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

² *The Biblical Truth*, at p. 5.

³ Bible-belt Executions (from 1976 thru 2015): TX 531, OK 112, VA 111, FL 91, MO 86, AL 56, GA 60, NC 43, SC 43, LA 28, AR 27, MS 21, TN 6 and KY 3: Total 1,218.

⁴ "Juvenile execution" refers to those executed for a crime committed while a minor. TX 13, VA 3, OK 2, MO 1, GA 1, SC 1, LA 1: Total of 22.