

A Holy Baptism of Fire & Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War

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Review

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Byrd, James P. *A Holy Baptism of Fire & Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. Oxford University Press, 2021. HARDBACK. \$34.95 ISBN 9780190902797 Illustrated, pp. 376.

Matthew 25 is a chapter of parables in the biblical New Testament. Speaking to his listeners in verses 21 and 23, Jesus says: “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou has been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter into the joy of thy Lord.*”

These vague biblical promises of future power for the faithful comprise the singular scriptural passage most frequently quoted in both the North and the South during the Civil War, as identified by James P. Byrd, Chair of the Graduate Department of Religion and Associate Professor of American Religious History at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, in his latest book, *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. Byrd’s in-depth volume, on the other hand, is anything but vague.

Excellent studies of religion during the Civil War have proliferated in recent decades, typically with the Bible lurking in the background or, at best, serving in a supporting role: George Rable’s “civil religion” (*God’s Almost Chosen Peoples*, 2010) and Harry S. Stout’s “moral history” (*Upon the Altar of the Nation*, 2006)—hallmark contributions both—are notable examples.

Byrd turns this paradigm upside down, placing the Bible—the most popular book in America in the Civil War era—front and center. As an overarching force enveloping the war, the Bible, for many Americans, continually created and recreated meaning amid an epic struggle over freedom and bondage, victory and defeat, life and death, hope and despair, politics and community.

Having honed his eye for the historic role of the Bible in early American life in a previous work, the critically-acclaimed *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution*, Byrd in his Civil War study zeroes in on the blood-soaked, battlefield crucifixion of some three-quarters of a century of political secularization beginning with the nation’s founding.

Voicing virtue but lacking the moral certainty of America’s colonial theocratic heritage, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution satisfied neither slaveowners nor abolitionists. Increasingly antagonizing one another with their respective and opposing self-righteousness buttressed

by selective biblical passages, the mid-19th century proponents and opponents of African slavery steered the nation toward a day of reckoning.

Deeply mining primary Civil War sources—newspaper articles, sermons, journals and slave narratives—for scriptural references, Byrd surfaces with a convincing broad framework of the war as a biblical conflict. Biblical citations and interpretations hover over and linger after battles—Bull Run, Shiloh (an ancient biblical city, and in the Civil War a church meeting house), Antietam, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, Atlanta, and many more—and saturate the parallel political and civil march toward freedom for enslaved Americans.

Unlike Mark A. Noll’s specific focus on slavery and providence in his perceptive *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (2006), Byrd ranges far afield, his narrative following the many contours of biblical verses voiced during the war. What did the Bible mean amid the greatest conflict in American history? Or perhaps more to the point of Byrd’s impressive work, what did the Bible *not* mean?

In total, leading biblical passages quoted during the war in the slaveocratic Southern Confederacy were primarily derived from an authoritarian and slavery-affirming Old Testament, while the increasingly abolitionist-minded North mainly quoted from a humanitarian-minded New Testament.

Certainty abounded. As southern states seceded from the Union, everyone understood slavery as the cause of the split. Alexander Stephens, vice president of the self-proclaimed Confederate States of America, stated the obvious: Slavery, he proclaimed, was the “cornerstone” of the Confederacy, an allusion to Mark 12:10—“The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner.”

War arrived. With hostilities commencing in the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter, Charleston minister Thomas Smyth framed the ideology of the war over slavery. “We have crossed swords with the Northern Confederacy over the Bible,” he observed. Both sides, he conceded, had consecrated “the war as holy and sacred,” but the North alone was “unholy” (90). Many northerners saw matters differently, and, in Byrd’s words, “picked up their weapons and their Bibles to make a case for a war” (57).

Righteousness rained down. Against the backdrop of founding documents absent God and Bible, South and North each wrapped their cause in dueling, flag-waving Christian nationalism. “Both sides volleyed biblical texts back and forth,” a war for ideological justification waged in tandem with roaring cannon, relentless rifle fire, and staggering death totals (134).

“[T]he Bible was full of war,” Byrd notes, a truism that South and North each embraced. “God was a warrior,” facing off against himself on the front lines (103).

Buttressing their warrior God, southern biblical pro-slavery arguments, sharpened in the preceding decades, spilled forth from the Bible. Southern Methodist minister John T. Wightman, certainly speaking for many white Southerners, insisted the Confederate “government is built upon the

Bible” (100). But he proved more creative than most. Expanding the repertoire of pro-slavery Old Testament verses to include Song of Solomon 1:5-6—“I am black, but comely ... Look not upon me, because I am black ... my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard I have not kept.”—he repurposed a book of erotica.

Northward, the Bible blessed and sustained the Union as the war dragged on. William Barrows of Massachusetts, preaching to a regiment of volunteers, insisted “The Bible is eminently a patriotic book” (5). Speaking to men previously taught morals but now charged with killing, Barrows focused on the biblical contradictions of war and peace. Praising the “glorious” vengeance of the God of the Old Testament over evildoers, he lamented that “The mildness and mercy of the New Testament over the Old are over-estimated and over-stated.” (112).

Congregationalist minister D. C. Sperry of Minnesota, as many other ministers North and South, re-interpreted the New Testament in service of country. Quoting “Greater love than no man has this—that a man lay down his life for his friend?”, Sperry creatively extrapolated that “He who lays down his life for such a Government as ours, gives it to a holy cause” (120).

As the body count bled into the hundreds of thousands, families sought meaning in death. Often appearing in obituaries, the most popular biblical verse in the South sought to convey, in Drew Gilpin Faust’s phrasing, “good death” (*This Republic of Suffering*, 2008): “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

Conversely, the passage far and away most cited in the North spoke not of war or death nor to assembled soldiers, but of hope for the enslaved in an ordained common humanity. “And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation” (Acts 17:26).

Prior to the war the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass equated Acts 17:26 with the aspirations of the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” During the war African Americans and white abolitionists alike clung to this New Testament passage and others, alongside the biblical story of God’s deliverance of his people from bondage in the Old Testament Exodus account, the latter brought to new life with Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and northern armies invasion into the Deep South.

Following his assassination, Abraham Lincoln—as president astutely knowledgeable of the Bible and seeker of God’s mysterious will, if not exactly pious—entered into the nation’s stream of biblical conscience. Comparisons to Solomon the wise and Samson the strong tumbled forth, but the

story of Moses the deliverer most captured the North's veneration—by Black and white alike—of Lincoln's life of moral integrity that ultimately steered America to long-sought freedom for African Americans. With controversial words many perhaps thought but fewer uttered, one northern minister spoke of Lincoln's sacrificial death as "Christ-like and divine" (265).

All told—and there is much in James Byrd's insightful narrative—*A Holy Baptism of Fire & Blood* is a unique and powerful first-hand recounting of the Civil War's ebb and flow through the elastic prism of the book most familiar to nineteenth-century Americans.

Harnessing, hoisting and hawking conflicting, personal biblical interpretations, northerners and southerners, Black and white, men and women forged parables and gods as needed to deliver them through the fires of the nation's bloodiest tribulation. In Byrd's remarkable volume, their voices yet speak.

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