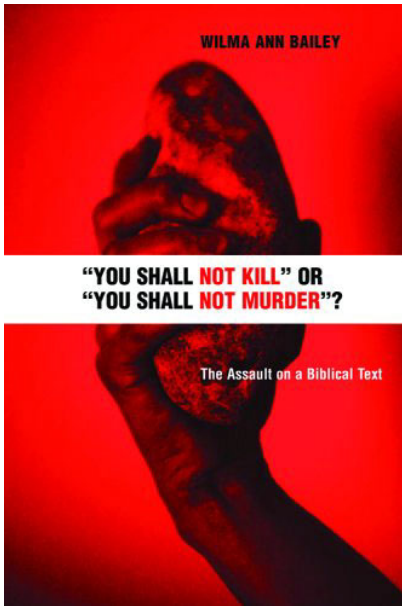


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Bailey, Wilma Ann

***“You Shall Not Kill” or “You Shall Not Murder”?:
The Assault on a Biblical Text***

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This book “is a powerful and prophetic denunciation of unnecessary taking of human life,” writes W. Harrelson (back cover). The book has a clear political bias: the author, associate professor of Hebrew and Aramaic Scripture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, takes a stand against the death penalty and is quite skeptical about war as a possible solution to conflicts (to say, the least). Thus, her political message is that “murder” is a much too narrow translation of the sixth/fifth commandment, in regard to the real problem of violence and killings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her thesis as a biblical scholar is that there are no semantic reasons and insufficient textual evidence for the change in recent Bible translations from “you shall not kill” to “you shall not murder.” This change, she argues, took place on a large scale during the second part of the twentieth century, and her question is: Why did this happen?

Chapter 1 covers the field of biblical studies. Following a definition of murder as “unsanctioned intentional killing of a human being by another human being” (6), Bailey deals with the semantic range of the word רצח based on contextual studies of the thirteen occurrences of the verb. Her line of argument is as follows. (1) The word’s meaning in lists (Exod 20; Deut 5; Jer 7:9–10; Hos 4:2) is ambiguous, but the ethical injunctions are not restricted to a single ethnic group. The relevance of this appears especially in relation

to those who state that Exod 20:13 addresses only Christians/members of the church (43). (2) In some cases (e.g., “the cities of refugees” texts), **רצח** is not adequately translated by “murder,” because some killings are unintentional. (3) Only three occurrences have the meaning of “murder” (in the technical sense): Hos 6:9; Ps 94:6; and Deut 22:26. Sometimes the word is used in connection with other words for “kill,” thus denoting a broader field of (unplanned) killing. (4) Sometimes **רצח** denotes an action of the court (Num 35:20–21) and other kinds of legal killing. In Prov 22:13 it denotes a killing by an animal. (5) Some cases that do denote murder do not use the verb, even when murder is the case (e.g., Exod 21:12; Lev 24:21; Num 35).

Another line of argument reduces the significance of the “permission-to-kill” expressions in the Bible, either by isolating them from other statements about killing or by denying that they permit human killing. The first applies to Exod 20 and 21. These two texts belong to different sources, and one should not be interpreted in the light of the other. The second applies to some cases in which killers will be put to death, which should not be read as support of capital punishment but rather as a prediction about what God will do (passive forms indicating divine subject). The author mentions explicitly Gen 9:6, which is central in religious acceptance of capital punishment (see 39). This, she argues, is not a command for capital punishment but a reflection on the escalation of violence (22). A possible use of Joshua and Judges as proof that killing is permitted is rejected on the general ground that these books, which tell about a time when “everyone did what was right in his [or her] eyes,” cannot be used as models of appropriate behavior (23). A final line of argument focuses on the general nature of the Ten Commandments, which limit neither the actions nor the addressees.

The second part, which covers about two-thirds of the book, describes the change in Bible translations and the (development of the) attitudes to war and capital punishment in evangelical Protestantism and mainline Protestant church traditions, the Roman Catholic Church, and Judaism in the United States. Bailey also reviews some central scholarly commentaries’ translations of the verse. In this part Bailey demonstrates that there was a general change from “kill” to “murder” in the second half of the twentieth century.

The author’s political bias makes for engaging reading. Her overall view and position are clear, and her presentation of the U.S. churches is, to a non-American, sometimes revealing. Some arguments are compelling, as far as they go, namely, those about the semantic range and usage of **רצח** in different texts. However, while the intention of the first chapter in relation to the main project is clear, there is no such overall statement of purpose for the remainder of the book, and its logical connection with the first part is not altogether clear. Does the author mean that the reason for the change in the Bible translations from “kill” to “murder” is due to a wider acceptance of war and capital

punishment and that the translation “murder” appears as some kind of adjustment to the practical and political situation of the churches becoming more “state-church-like” (e.g., 46, 49)? If so, her thesis begs further investigation. Let me just mention, from a European perspective, that the Danish Bible changed from “kill” to “murder” in the late 1990s, but neither is capital punishment favored in the Danish society nor is there a growing positive attitude to (just) war but rather to the contrary. Its immediate context is the German translations, which have both (Einheitsübers. 1980: “morden”; rev. Lutherbibel 1984 and rev. Elberfelder 1993: “töten”).

Thus, there are some incomplete elements in the book. It should, however, make Bible translators cautious about a too-rapid shift to “murder” in Exod 20:13. When Bailey touches on the attitude of biblical texts to killing as a whole, an area where she is careful not to make definite statements, the reader should not form conclusions too hastily. From a humanist perspective, most European theologians would probably oppose capital punishment. It is a much more difficult task, however, to argue for this from the Hebrew Bible.