

Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution

Review Number:

1577

Publish date:

Thursday, 10 April, 2014

Author:

James P. Byrd

ISBN:

9780199843497

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£18.99

Pages:

256pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Publisher url:

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199843497.do>

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Benjamin M. Guyer

The last decade has seen a rapid rise of interest in the religious contours of the American Revolution. The reasons for this are diverse. Within the United States, there are continuing debates over the separation of – and, conversely, the relationship between – church and state. On a broader, global level, 9/11 and the Second Gulf War have brought to the fore questions concerning the interrelationship of religion, violence, and imperialism. Historical study obviously has something to say concerning each of these. One can now peruse multiple monograph-length surveys concerned with the place of religion in the developments that proceeded from 1776. One can also find more specific studies which focus on the relationship of revolutionary patriotism to both particular religious communities – whether Catholic, Anglican, or Dissenter – as well as particular locales – notably Virginia and New England. And, as one might expect, there is almost no shortage of material published on the diverse religious views of the Founding Fathers. Happily, the historiography has grown to such an extent that topical studies are now also being published. Among these is James P. Byrd's short but potent *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution*. Consisting of an introduction, six chapters, an epilogue, and an appendix, this is the first work to investigate the interpretation and application of the Bible in revolutionary America.

In the second paragraph of the introduction, Byrd observes that 'the Bible has been a constant presence in American wars' (p. 1), oftentimes because of the view that America is 'a blessed nation on a divine mission' (p. 2). Byrd then takes an unexpected turn. Rather than citing any of a number of colonial preachers or

revivalist ministers, he ponders the use of the Bible in the radically heterodox writings of Thomas Paine. Paine's use of the Bible was not like that of most 18th-century believers; John Adams recognized the same and criticized Paine for his interpretations of Scripture. However, Paine recognized that, in Byrd's words, a work such as *Common Sense* 'had to make biblical sense' to its readers. *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* is, in many ways, about the ability to use a religious text to justify desired political ends, regardless of how orthodox those intents may or may not have been. As Byrd briefly surveys uses of the Bible between 1675 and 1800, he shows that it was used to vindicate war against Native Americans, attacks upon the French and especially their Catholicism, and eventually opposition to the British government. 'The vast majority of Revolutionary-era Americans ... were hardly biblical skeptics' (p. 7). No less importantly, they lived and fought in a colonial context that already had a long history of using the Bible to interpret and rationalize both conquest and war.

Byrd's first chapter is the longest. He begins by looking at 1776 and pays especial attention to the preaching culture in New England, where 'Congregationalist ministers alone preached over 2000 sermons each week' (p. 16). In this chapter, sermons – always spoken, and oftentimes printed – are the primary media under investigation. Regrettably, Byrd does not make clear whether sermons and the Bible should be understood as separate *topoi* under shared consideration; most of the time, the medium seems to fuse the message and its Biblical sources together. Perhaps this should be expected, given that sermons are live interpretations of the Bible. But surely just as the colonies had different political cultures, they had different preaching cultures which preached different understandings of the Bible. Some reflection on this would have been welcome. The bulk of the chapter is concerned, however, with the development and afterlife of 'martial preaching' (pp. 20, 27), which Byrd dates to King Philip's War (1675). Militant American uses of the Bible thus originated in the intertwined contexts of Restoration England and Puritan conflict with Native Americans in the New World. Not all uses of the Bible were intellectual; some were borne of popular religion, which believed that the Bible could protect soldiers who carried it with them into battle. Here too we see that armed conflict was the impetus for these beliefs. Byrd avers, 'It is no accident that New England was both the most sermon-saturated and the most militant region in colonial North America' (p. 20). This remained true through the end of the 18th century. It can be seen during the Seven Years' War, when preachers used the Bible to denounce Roman Catholicism, France, and their Native American allies in one fell swoop. It was also evident in opposition to the Stamp Act and reactions to the so-called 'Boston Massacre'. Throughout, the emphasis is on sermons, but the chapters which follow reveal that, insofar as the history can be reconstructed, the best way to understand colonial interpretations of the Bible is by studying the preached and subsequently printed word.

The second, third, and fourth chapters deal with three of the most popular Biblical themes in Revolutionary America. Chapter two looks at Exodus, chapter three studies the prophetic narratives of Deborah and Jeremiah, and chapter four outlines uses of the Israelite king David. These chapters are not arranged in order of popularity. The Song of Deborah was 'the most cited passage in over a century of colonial war sermons' (p. 73). Exodus, particularly its 15th chapter, was the third most popular Biblical narrative (p. 51), while six of the 20 most frequently referenced Bible stories were concerned with David, who became 'the American Revolution's most versatile biblical character' (p. 95; citing p. 115). The topical organization appears to be a concession to contemporary readership. However historically inconvenient, this was probably a wise pedagogical move on Byrd's part. The Song of Deborah occurs in one lone chapter of the Old Testament book of Judges, but one suspects that many people have heard of Moses and the Exodus story. Chapters two and three thus work by beginning with something more familiar before moving on to what is more foreign and less well known. In looking at David, the fourth chapter follows a similar pattern, beginning with the story of David and Goliath before continuing with an analysis of the difficulties which beset the Davidic monarchy – stories which patriots used as a sign that monarchy was inherently corrupt, but which many readers today may be less knowledgeable about.

The fifth chapter analyzes several texts, all of which were concerned with how Christians should approach monarchy. Among these is Romans 13, 'the most widely cited Biblical text in Revolutionary America'. Byrd argues that this is a 'surprising fact' because the historiography has traditionally spent most of its time

analyzing uses of either the Old Testament or apocalyptic works (p. 117). This does not mean that Byrd has fully broken with the general trend; as already noted, three chapters in this book are concerned with the Old Testament, and chapter six looks at the use of apocalyptic texts. But by tabulating the popularity of Biblical passages and then using these results to inform his conclusions, Byrd is able to illuminate the ubiquity of otherwise little-studied texts, the meaning of which challenged impassioned patriots. In Romans 13 and related passages, most notably 1 Peter 2, colonists encountered a significant problem: these letters repeatedly exhorted the first Christians to respect the reigning political powers. Furthermore, as the patriotic preacher Jonathan Mayhew recognized, no New Testament text ever encouraged Christians to revolt against a tyrant (p. 125). There was no easy way out of this conundrum; the plain meaning of the text was elided in various ways, such as by distinguishing between kings and tyrants, or by appealing to reason. The results of this chapter are both discerning and fresh. The sixth and final chapter nuances the received historiography with two theses. On the one hand, Byrd suggests that patriots appealed to apocalyptic texts far less than is often recognized; on the other hand, he persuasively argues that they were relied upon ‘more to stress militant Christianity than an American millennium’ (p. 162). Standard apocalyptic episodes such as the attempt to decipher the meaning of ‘666’ are mentioned but are not central to these pages. Instead, Byrd uses this chapter to detail colonial debates over pacifism, many of which appealed to apocalyptic texts not as an opportunity for apocalyptic speculation, but as a justification for war. Here again, the narrative is genuinely stimulating.

With the epilogue, Byrd proposes that in the American Revolution, ‘the Bible was arguably its most influential book’ – and yet, this does not mean that ‘the Bible was the key to understanding the Revolution, or that the Bible was the main source of revolutionary politics’. Rather, the Bible ‘became patriotically American’ (p. 164). This raises an interesting question given his later statement that ‘most revolutionaries claimed to be fighting a just war, and not an outright holy war’ (p. 166). If the Bible was so influential, and if it was so persuasively and consistently joined to the patriotic cause through the mass dissemination of ‘martial preaching’, might one conclude that many if not most colonial Americans were encouraged to perceive the American Revolution as a religiously-motivated war? Is this really different than ‘an outright holy war’? These are questions about popular perception, and they need not deny that for most colonial Americans, the American Revolution was also concerned with freedom, taxes, the right to steal Native American land, and a wide variety of other matters. But these are questions well worth asking. The epilogue ends, too soon, with a three-paragraph consideration of ‘Legacies’ – but the only topics of consideration are *The American Patriot’s Bible* of 2009 and an all-too-brief reference to Biblical interpretation in the American Civil War. This is the only significant misstep in the book. No doubt multiple volumes could be written on the topic of legacies, but because it was broached, a more sustained consideration would have been helpful. Byrd’s *foci* are, however, good illustrations of how deeply rooted his and other such books are in the distinctly American legacy of the American Revolution. British legacies do not appear to have been even an afterthought.

The appendix is two pages long. In it, Byrd explains his method: the creation of a database covering 543 sources, including most of the sermons and major pamphlets published between 1674 and 1800. Together, these yielded 17,148 Biblical passages. A table conveniently lists the eight most-cited passages from the Revolutionary Era (1763– 1800), along with the number of times that the passage appears in the database, and the chapter of the book in which it is discussed. Byrd offers a telling insight when he writes, ‘The texts cited most frequently were not always well-developed by colonists’ (p. 170). Using as his example Psalm 124, the seventh most popular Biblical pericope, Byrd explains that this text was popular because its second and third verses could be used as a proof text for the view that God was on the side of the American patriots. The use of Psalm 124 was fundamentally rhetorical. Presumably, many other portions of Scripture were used in a similar fashion.

Regrettably (at least from the standpoint of the present reviewer), the book does not contain footnotes but endnotes – 62 pages of them, to be exact. They are well worth reading. Time and again, they reveal how deeply rooted Byrd’s research is in both the historiography of the last several decades and the primary sources themselves. They also reveal something else which, although not unique to Byrd’s work, is

seemingly endemic to the historiography on colonial America. The vast majority of Byrd's secondary sources are American authors such as Gordon Wood, Mark Noll, and Thomas Kidd. British historians who work on this same era – one thinks, in particular, of the work of James B. Bell – are not taken into consideration. A similar observation can be made with reference to the primary source material. Although a few references are made to 'Tory' critics of the American Revolution such as John Wesley (pp. 56, 118) and especially Charles Inglis (pp. 120–3), the narrative is primarily focused upon patriots. Nor are there any references made to British 'Whig' sympathizers such as Edmund Burke. Insofar as *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* is intended to tell the *American* side of this story, this is exactly what one would expect, and Byrd succeeds admirably in his task. But one might also question how well this story can be told if one looks almost exclusively at colonial publications. The American Revolution may have happened in the American colonies, but it took place within the British Empire. Future work in this area should try to bridge the Atlantic, accounting for both American and British primary and secondary sources.

There is much to be gleaned from *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War*. It will be foundational for all future studies of the Bible and the American Revolution, and it will be of great interest and relevance for broader studies of religion in late colonial America.

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