

Religion Today
June 8-14, 2003
No Bibles in the Jury Box, Please!
Paul V.M. Flesher

Recently, a Colorado judge overturned a 1995 death sentence for a convicted murderer and rapist because the jury members had consulted a Bible. The use of the Bible rendered invalid their decision to impose the death penalty on Robert Harlan for his crimes, even though the judge who made the ruling considered them to be the most "grievous, heinous and reprehensible" he had seen in 18 years on the bench.

According to lawyer Scott Robinson, writing in the Rocky Mountain News, United States' law forbids juries from using outside or extraneous material during their deliberations. The law that forbids newspapers, TV, the Internet, and even a dictionary, also forbids the consulting of Scripture. It is simply a way to prevent jury contamination. And it is precisely that sort of contamination that rendered the sentence invalid (although the conviction still stands).

The jurors' actions indicate some think Scripture, although written between 1,900-3,000 years ago in the Middle East, remains relevant to the American situation today. They had extended discussions about the meaning of specific Bible passages in which several jurors attempted to apply biblical concepts to their decision. Moreover, one juror brought a Bible into the jury room to show another juror some passages because, she said, "he was reluctant to obey the laws of the land." Her words indicate she equates biblical laws with current American law. Jurors furthermore indicated that the discussion of biblical passages caused some to change their opinions and vote for the death penalty.

The idea that Scripture constitutes an important guide for today's Christians (and Jews) is certainly a widespread belief among many Americans today. Many believers consult it daily to help them make decisions or guide their behavior. This is a valid religious activity; as a professor of religious studies, I see nothing wrong with it. However, like everything, there are right and wrong ways to do it.

Take the laws about murder, for example. Most biblical laws about murder appear in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They were given by God who intended them as the law for the Israelites in their wanderings and then for the nation which they would

establish. The nation Israelites created has several key differences from the United States, which make any equating of biblical law with American law highly questionable.

First, the Israelite nation was ruled first by God and then by a divinely-selected king. There was no voting for officials, whether local or national. There was no democracy. There was no representational government on behalf of the citizens. The entire basis for our government would have been an anathema to the ancient Israelites.

Second, in the United States, citizens have the right, even duty, to question, debate and seek the repeal of laws we think are unjust. In ancient Israel, the penalty for questioning God's law could be death.

Third, the laws of Leviticus and other biblical books are often more harsh than our own. Deuteronomy 21 states that a son who fails to honor his father and mother should be put to death. This law is given with the same weight as Deuteronomy 19's rule that those who commit premeditated murder should be put to death. Present United States' law follows the latter but not the former. This is because of a choice that American citizens have made. At any time we could institute punishment for disrespecting our parents.

Since American government is not based on that of ancient Israel, many of our most cherished institutions, such as elected representative government, would have been abhorrent to them. Nor do our laws reflect those of ancient Israel. We have chosen ours, whereas the Israelites were given theirs by God. That ability to choose, and our citizens' duty to continue to choose, has an impact on how Christians today should use Scripture in their everyday lives; it should be done with thought and knowledge, and not merely by rote citation.