

The History Channel's violent God

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue



Still from History's *The Bible*. Photo credit: Joe Alblas

Without intending to, I turned to the History Channel's *The Bible* recently and saw the birth of Moses, the slaughter of Hebrew babies and the rescue of baby Moses from the river. I experienced discomfort bordering on revulsion at the occasional exaggeration of the biblical narrative, yet I kept watching as Moses killed an Egyptian guard who was beating a slave and fled into the wilderness looking like Norman Mailer after a night of drinking, brawling and carousing. There he encountered Yahweh in a burning bush that reminded me of a fireworks display over Navy Pier in Chicago.

Along with millions of other viewers, I saw Moses return to the palace to confront the new pharaoh. The Passover angel of death moved through the city streets in a creeping fog that reminded me of the fog of mosquito insecticide that spewed from city trucks years ago. Then the Red Sea parted in the nick of time for the Hebrews before it flooded back to drown Pharaoh's pursuing army. There was death and destruction everywhere, all orchestrated and carried out by God.

Who could believe in a God like this? Who could believe in a God who orders his people to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan, making certain that everyone is dead, just to make way for God's people?

The problem with *The Bible* and most media representations of the biblical story is that they are so literal. In the effort to get the details of the story right, the storyteller misses the point. Over the years, most of us come to an accommodation

with biblical texts that stretch the imagination—particularly those texts that portray God as vengeful, angry and murderous. We parse the Red Sea story as a myth, a story that reveals an important truth about God and human beings. Maybe the Red Sea was a swamp; maybe the pursuing Egyptian chariots became mired in the mud; maybe the people of God told the story of their ancestors' unlikely escape from Egypt and added details with each retelling. But for most of us the point is not the story; the point is the gracious providence of God, which operates in history as hope and justice and love.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan who directs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico (and writes a fine daily meditation online), offers a working hermeneutic for interpreting scripture. In regard to *any* text, Rohr proposes: "If you see God operating at a lesser level than the best person you know, then the text is not authentic revelation." If God is love (1 John 4:16), then no person could be more loving than God, Rohr says. "God is never less loving than the most loving person you know."

Most of us, like Rohr, do not believe, *cannot* believe, that God told the Hebrew people to kill everyone who got in their way. No doubt the Hebrews did commit horrible acts; history is full of such stories. But the voice they heard wasn't God's voice.

It's a sad reality that many continue to believe that God orchestrates death, destruction and human suffering and orders people to kill. That, in my mind, is a gross and harmful distortion.