

When the Bible is profane

I led a study of Judges. It wasn't easy.

By [David Williams](#)

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Pierre Raymond, Jael Killing Sisera, painted enamel on copper, 16th century.

It was not the easiest class. Our goal: a full, engaged reading of the book of Judges. I'd committed to leading it a couple of months back, being the teaching elder at my little congregation and all, and I don't regret it.

It's a fascinating book, truly and genuinely ancient, chock full of tales that rise out of the late Bronze Age. Here, songs and stories that are over three millennia old, narratives that rise up from deep in the primal memory of the people of Israel.

That alone makes them worthy of study and worthy of deeper exploration.

But it doesn't make them any less brutal. Judges starts with a captive king having his toes and thumbs cut off, and it pretty much goes downhill from there. [It's chock full of ultraviolence, as the imprisoned Alex DeLarge discovered](#) to his delight, as much so as any of the savage tales of our violence-loving culture. The heroes of the tale nail sleeping men's heads to the ground with spikes, and flay village elders to death with thorned branches. They butcher their own children. Even Samson, Samson of countless Sunday school coloring books? He's driven by lust, betrays his sacred oaths, and murders entire villages to pay off his debts.

It ends with mass abductions and rapes, as a tribe of Israel storms into a local festival to kidnap young women with the sole intent of using them as chattel breeding slaves. It's something straight out of the Boko Haram playbook.

Next to the book of Judges, [Deadpool](#) and [Judge Dredd](#) seem like callow newbies.

And yet. Were I fool enough to read any of this in worship, I'd have end my reading with "This is the word of God," to which the good souls of my little church would have to stammer out, "Thanks...be to...cough...God?"

There is, quite frankly, nothing sacred about it.

Fundamentalism, in its reflexive idolatry, assumes that there axiomatically must be. But there is not. Judges is unrelentingly profane, a story of blood and betrayal and human horror. It is so by design.

That does not mean that it is unworthy of inclusion in our sacred story.

All scripture is God-breathed, and useful for teaching, as that 2 Timothy touchstone goes, and the book of Judges is no exception.

It is worth teaching because it reminds us of how easily human power corrupts, and how far back our love of blood goes. It is worth remembering because it holds us to account, and reminds us that our understanding of God's intent for us sometimes wanders far from grace, compassion, and justice.

And is it God's word? Sure, because nothing in creation is not God's self-expression.

Even those wildly profane things that have nothing to do with God's grace, if we have the wisdom to learn from them.

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