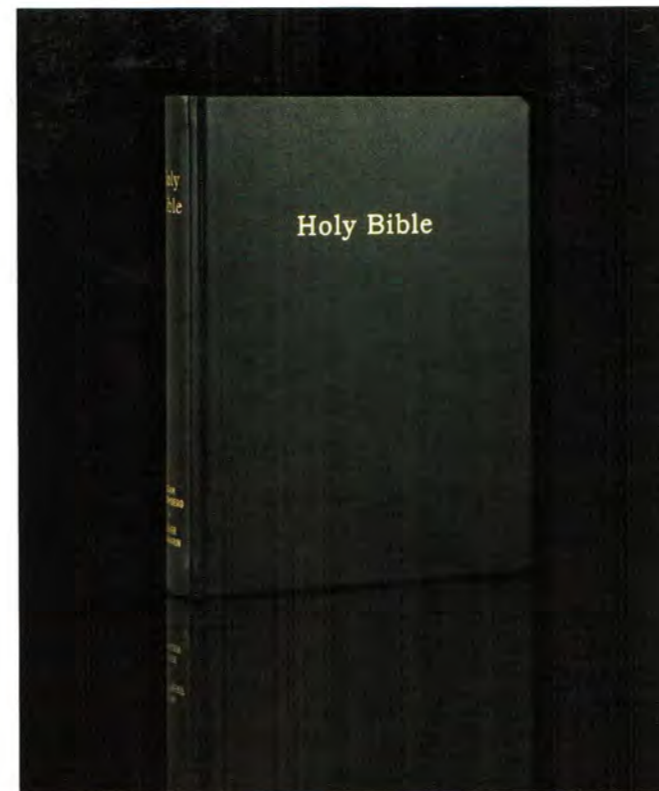


The Holy Bible Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin



"Is nothing sacred anymore?" asked one viewer of *The Holy Bible* as people gathered round for their first glance at Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's newest, and quite possibly most controversial publication to date. Though this comment was loaded with mock irony, it is also a signifier for the debate that has opened up around the book following its release. Bound in black leather, with gold-edged pages and mimicking the exact form and structure of the King James Bible, Broomberg and Chanarin have created an appropriated, illustrated version of the Christian scripture. Citing seeing a picture of a racing car glued to the front cover of Bertolt Brecht's personal bible as their definitive starting point, the artists worked to pair found images from the collection at the Archive of Modern Conflict with sections of the text.

Just as you may find annotations in any studied Bible, this book, with its red underlined sections, works with a similar idea. The Bible itself is arguably one of the most multi-interpreted texts ever written and the book mirrors that — though at times the connection between word and image is obvious, at others it is oblique, and the viewer is able to make our own connections and narrative. Less an entirely finished product and more a collection of visual notes towards something far greater, it is like opening the sketchbooks of the artists, and seeing a cross-section of their own personal idea of what a fair representation of catastrophe looks like. People will often talk of the "theatre of war" and that's an interesting subject here — the photographs themselves are just facsimiles, symbolic signifiers of the words that could ultimately have been placed in any infinite number of variations and in this sense the chosen images become something like rehearsals of the text.

The book is a tidal wave of imagery and be warned, it is not always a beautiful thing — images of war, death, sex, mutilation, deformation and terrorism line the pages. There are some particularly chilling pairs — "into the fields of the fatherless" marks a photograph of prisoners with sacks over their heads, in 1 Samuel a couple pose proudly with their

guns alongside the words "play the mad man", in Daniel a missile exploding across the sky receives the words "and he shall destroy wonderfully" and in Leviticus the words "cut down your images" sit above a hanging man as giant crosses rise in the background. The book is based on a belief that, though difficult to look at, these events should not be ignored — if they are happening then they must continue to be witnessed and documented and what's left of it must be disseminated until it is understood.

The book was largely shaped around an essay named "Divine Violence" by Adi Ophir that is included at the end of Broomberg and Chanarin's book. Ophir offers that God reveals himself through acts of catastrophe and that structures of power within the Bible fall in line with more modern structures of governance. Having long been concerned with a deep mistrust of images and the way in which any political or social condition is represented through them, the artists explore the dissemination of images and their mass consumption and play with what they believe to be an unspoken set of rules that determine the "acceptable" way in which to document terror. To a nation completely over-saturated with images of abject human suffering, they are often just images. So far detached from any real event and seen in myriad versions over and over again we become numb to the sight of them. But when the context in which the image is viewed changes, the code changes too. As an image in the newspaper, these images are glanced at, consumed, the page is turned — upon the gallery wall or within this book they become something completely different. Though there are sure to be those that find this publication problematic or blasphemous there will be just as many that appreciate the startling power that lies within this considerably sophisticated publication.

Alongside the fire and brimstone images of death and destruction, the billowing smoke of war zones and atomic bombs is later the smoke and mirrors of magicians and circus performers, of show birds and playing cards, of levitation and of people flying through the air, and acrobats and tightrope walkers and glamorous assistants jovially having their limbs cut off for the crowd and again we return to the theatrical. The painted faces of performers and children mirror the masks of soldiers and prisoners. Even at times we see people, through the imperfect chemicals of photography, appearing to burst into light. The words "and it came to pass" are used to punctuate the book intermittently alongside these images as if to remind us that everything is temporary.

Having previously said that when searching through the archives at AMC they found the private photo albums of Nazi soldiers, we are ultimately to understand that it is all there — those glimpses of intimate tenderness, love, compassion and desire exist whilst the murmur of great events rumbles on. Broomberg and Chanarin's *Holy Bible* is filled not just with images — those capricious, relative, untrustworthy agents — but also with ghosts, and acts as a reminder of the eternal balance of lightness and weight that (morally and politically) all of humanity lies thrashing somewhere between.

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