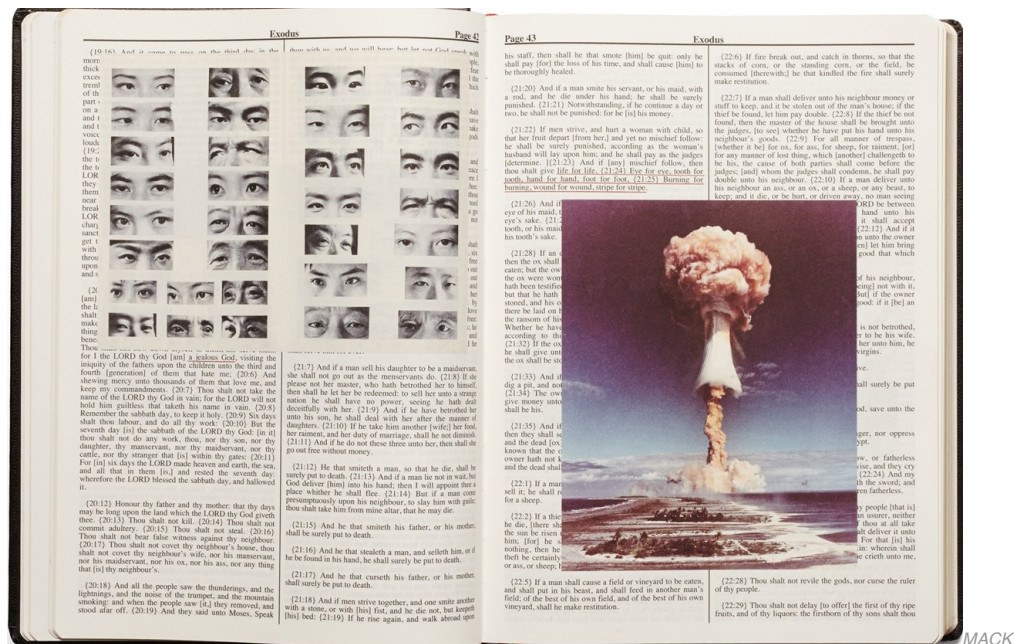
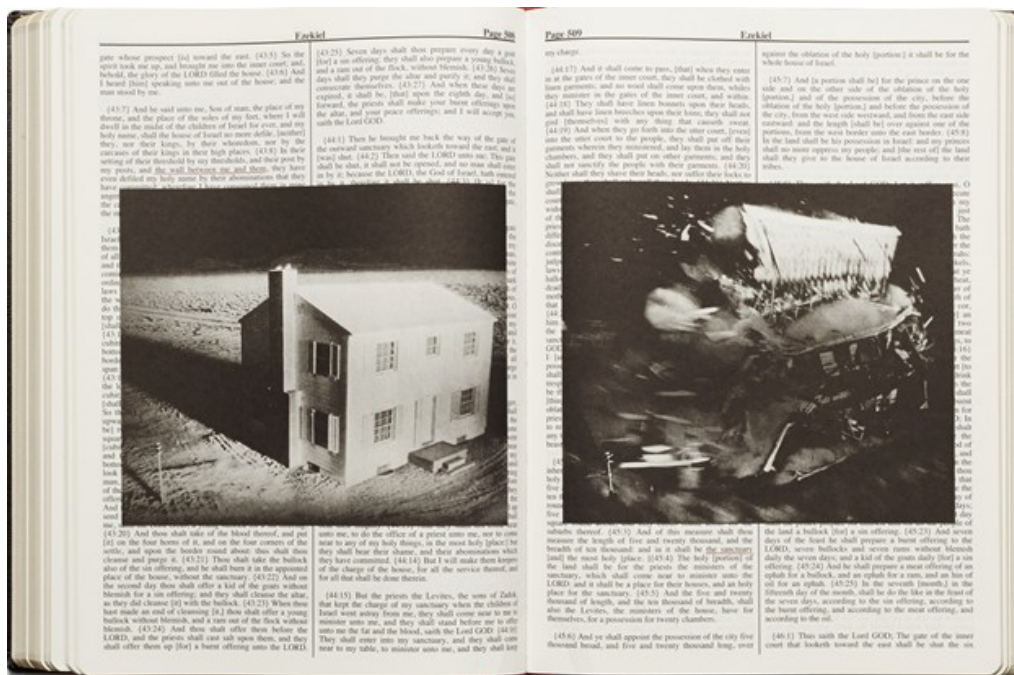


# Holy Bible reprinted with images of war, genocide and comedy overlaid

05 JUNE 13 by [LIAT CLARK](#)



What do images of a dismembered head, a naked woman and concentration camp victims have in common? They each feature in the *King James Bible* -- or at least, a modern reprinting of it.



London-based artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin have carefully overlaid images from The Archive of Modern Conflict onto each page of the Bible, images they believe are representative of the horror and madness of global catastrophes we have become numb to, due to the filtration of those images by mainstream media. Those themes of hardship and horror are common occurrences in the Bible, hence the pair have used the ancient tome to point to a cycle of retribution we appear to be living in still, with a vengeful god today replaced by law and nation.

Broomberg and Chanarin are no strangers to these themes. Trained photographers, the pair explored ideas of passively accepted media and state censorship in *War Primer 2*, a 2012 book that has been nominated for this year's Deutsche Borse photography prize. To create it, they took 100 copies of Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer* (1955), in which the German poet and playwright featured images of war alongside poems describing the truth behind the scene, and replaced those images with modern counterparts. This latest project is, however, the first time they've had to get permission from the Queen -- albeit indirectly -- to reprint a text (it's owned by the head of state).

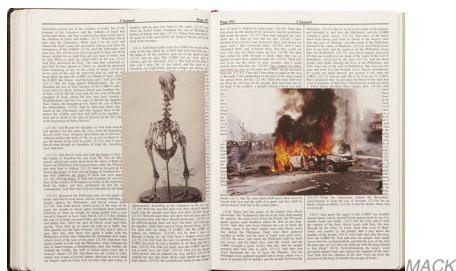
## "Bertolt Brecht was so suspicious of press images he referred to them as hieroglyphics in need of deciphering"

Oliver Chanarin

The idea for *Holy Bible* arose when Broomberg and Chanarin came across Bertolt Brecht's own copy of the text. "It caught our attention because it has a photograph of a racing car glued to the cover," Chanarin told Wired.co.uk. Seeing this juxtaposition struck the pair -- they were hooked on the absurdity of representing one truth with an image so disparate. It's also something we see all the time in modern war photography. An *Associated Press* image of a statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled became synonymous with the "victory" of the Iraq war in 2003, for instance. It was shown to the world as an example of speedy triumph, a triumph that of course would be shown to be far less black and white.

"Brecht was deeply concerned about the use of photographs in newspapers, something that was relatively new at the time," said Chanarin. "He was so suspicious of press images that he referred to them as hieroglyphics in need of deciphering or decoding. We share this concern, in fact now more than ever, images of conflict that are distributed in the mainstream media are even less able to affect any real political action."

Using the Bible to reflect this disparity seemed like an obvious choice. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the Old Testament would recognise the vengeful God in some of the images pasted across the passages -- "we constantly witness death [in the Old Testament] on an epic scale and the victims hardly ever know what they have done to deserve such retribution," says Chanarin.



Moreover, just as there is a disparity in our interpretation of war -- driven so often by a disparity in the images we are being shown, and the tales we are being told, with the realities of war -- there is a disparity in how this vengeance is interpreted. For example, for the whole of Earth, its people and animals, through Genesis chapters six to nine, God was filled with fury and retribution -- as proven when he wiped them off the face of the planet. For Noah, apparently the only "righteous man" on that planet, God was a just saviour, recognising he was "blameless among the people of his time".

Building on this disparity between the author's view of God as just and loving, and his acts of apparently hasty vengeance in the form of natural disasters, Broomberg and Chanarin's central premise takes from Divine Violence, a passage from Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir's *Two Essays on God*. In it, Ophir relays how a vengeful God used acts of catastrophe time and again to assert himself, and how these acts would repeatedly be "a miracle for some and a catastrophe for others". It's not hard to see how that unbalance is mirrored today: modern warfare is so often depicted through patriotic imagery or rhetoric that positions it as miracle for those being saved, at home or abroad, while conveniently ignoring the fact that the catastrophe does not solely fall to aggressors and perpetrators, but ordinary people too.

## **"The state has taken, or might seem to be taking his role as the chief author of destruction and the ultimate agent of providence"**

Adi Ophir

"He always had his reasons," writes Ophir, about the Old Testament god. "If he didn't announce them himself, others did it for him; each generation with its sins; each with its catastrophes. The two are so tightly linked that whenever one spots a grave sin, one can read it as a sign of a coming catastrophe." Only when the Israelites reached the desert, said Ophir, were the laws of the land given to them, and even then they were used as reasons for more punishment. This leads nicely into Ophir, and Broomberg and Chanarin's suggestions that our modern state is not so different from a vengeful Old Testament god.

"On the one hand, the state has become a potential or actual generator and facilitator of large-scale disasters, and the destructive power of some states has been brought to perfection," writes Ophir. "On the other hand, the state has also become a facilitator, sponsor, and co-ordinator of assistance, relief and survival in times of disaster. In both cases, the state has taken, or might seem to be taking his role as the chief author of destruction and the ultimate agent of providence."



Ophir's reading of the Bible, says Chanarin, "suggests a contract we are all silently and forcibly bound into with the modern state and our naïve acceptance of the harsh punishments the state meters out; prison, the death sentence, a war on drugs, on terror".

"The camera has always been drawn to these themes," he says, "to sights of human suffering, and since it's inception it has been used to record but also participate in catastrophic events".

Choosing which images to overlay on the text and translate these complex messages was an arduous and grim process.

"Our days at the archive, sifting through all this material was difficult," says Chanarin. "So many dead people's faces. It's depressing. But somehow we discovered a lot of humour too."

This humour is represented on pages where the phrase "And it came to pass", is written. "This phrase reminded us of the familiar device used in soap operas when the word 'meanwhile' appears on screen. It's a little Brechtian reminder that this isn't reality, but a story we are being told."

**"The narrative is an extremely personal and idiosyncratic one; an unofficial version of the history of war"**

Oliver Chanarin

The Brechtian reminder is a nod to a theatrical tool devised by the playwright known as the "alienating effect". It involves a series of techniques such as exposing the ropes and lights behind the stage design or having an actor turn to the audience to explain their drive. In this way, the audience is reminded throughout that what they're seeing is theatre, and limits their emotional attachment. In the *Holy Bible*, this is represented through images of acrobatic stunts, card games, dog tricks or magicians performing daring acts. It's telling us the Bible is not representative of reality, but may also be telling us that the history of warfare being told by Broomberg and Chanarin is not reality either, but a partial truth and a slither of the whole truth.

In context of this, Chanarin refers to Brecht once more, who called his own published works as *versuche* (attempts) rather than the more common *werke* (works). "It is not a fixed thing but an







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"We saw moments of intimacy between men, we see them kissing their wives goodbye, hugging their children. These images run counter to the narrative we're used to. We're not used to seeing Nazi's displaying human traits; showing tenderness, emotion, desire."

The retelling of history, and all its subjective twists and turns, is portrayed in equally discombobulated fashion through Broomberg and Chanarin's reimagining of the ancient text, with images of pinups and corpses interspersed incongruously with family snapshots of Halloween night and circus acts. It is as mind boggling as a literal reading of the Bible might be or, perhaps, belief in one-sided monologues of what modern warfare is.

"Why shy away from these images?" asks Chanarin, speaking about a few particular gruesome ones Wired.co.uk pointed out, including what looks like the dismembered head of a suicide bomber sitting, bloodied on the street. "They exist even if we don't like to look at them. The artist Thomas Hirschhorn has argued that images of destroyed bodies need to be looked at. It is our duty to look at them. We see the inclusion of these types of images in our Bible as an antidote to the way in which mainstream media is horribly controlled and sanitised."

*The Holy Bible is co-published by MACK and the AMC, priced £50.*