

Hill & White, "God, Nimrod, and the World: Exploring Christian Perspectives on Sport Hunting"

Robert Carlton Stallman

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Book Review

Hill, Bracy V. & John B. White, eds. *God, Nimrod, and the World: Exploring Christian Perspectives on Sport Hunting*. Mercer University Press, 2017.

The topic of sport hunting abides at the intersection of politics, ethics, and conservation as well as animal, property and gun rights. When brought into contact with Christian and Jewish theological traditions, debates about it understandably become complex, leading in some instances to extreme polarization. Yet, for all that is at stake for Christian sport hunters and their detractors, there are relatively few resources that locate the discussion in relation to so many of these essential perspectives. This volume offers academic essays of sixteen scholars from the fields of religion, philosophy, ethics, biblical studies, history, and sociology. It is thus a welcome resource for those seeking to inform their own perspectives on the relationship between God, people, and wild animals.

The book is edited by Bracy V. Hill II and John B. White, who hold differing views about the morality of sport hunting. On the one hand, White (Professor in Practical Theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University) believes it has no legitimate place in Christian thinking and practice. On the other hand, Hill (senior lecturer in History at Baylor) is an active Christian and hunter. Obviously supportive, he finds simple answers (on both sides) less than convincing and so is in sustained pursuit of genuinely tenable answers to questions surrounding Christian sport hunting. Thoroughly academic, the book feels less like a two-sided debate and more like an invitation to grow in understanding.

In addition to the wide range of interests presented and scholarly depth of the essays, a strength of the book is its thoughtful organization which helps the reader to map a wide range of issues. Following an introductory essay in which Hill and White survey the state of the field and present a clear definition of sport hunting, the remaining essays fall into two halves: the first descriptive and the second prescriptive. The first begins with Hill's orientation to locating hunting in place and time both in history and the present. The remaining essays begin with studies of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and move to Western Europe and the societies that came to influence the faith and cultures of English-speaking North America (19). This part concludes with an essay titled "In Their Own Words: On Hunting, By Hunters" which is a montage of shorter pieces from nearly a dozen individuals with significant interest and experience in the field. These include professional athletes, musicians, teachers, writers, speakers, celebrity hunters, and a soldier.

Kenneth Bass attends to how biblical language about hunting regarded it as a normal and divinely-supported way to acquire meat. Most of his essay deals with the metaphorical language employed most often to map the conceptual frame of hunting onto negative personal

situations such as pursuit and capture. Noting the portrayal of Yahweh himself as a hunter, Bass concludes that the language of the Bible “supports the wide knowledge of, acceptance of, and approval of hunting in the ancient world of the Bible” (49). This perspective provides a general backdrop to the point of the book: hunting for sport. In the last essay of the book, Hill returns his readers to the Bible by suggesting that the differing positions on hunting may be reduced to two theological visions: the created world in which humans bear the burdens and responsibilities of dominion and the eschatological world of peace that is free of pain and predation.

The Bible says little of Nimrod beyond his identity as “a mighty hunter before the Lord” (Gen 10:9). Hill raises awareness of the historical interpretations of this “malleable character” as villain, spiritual predator, symbol of political tyranny, and “redeemable hunter extraordinaire” (25). Stephen Webb lends additional historical perspective of another little-known individual in his treatment of the fourth-century ascetic Naucratus. Brother of the Cappadocian Fathers Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, his life blended rigorous pursuit of spirituality with the physical demands of hunting both as adventures worthy of his utmost. Naucratus hunted to sustain himself and to provide for others, yet the practice was for him, thoroughly philosophical and thus central to his monastic calling. The reader is left to connect the values of this holy hunter with sport hunting as practiced today.

Closer to the Modern era, Alastair Durie follows the changing perspectives in Britain from c.1800–2000, noting that it was not until the later Victorian period that field sports such as fox and deer hunting became issues for moral reflection. His essay highlights the role of multiple concerns such as social class, access to land, expense, and the cruelty of hunting aided by dogs. Through the analysis of Michael Gilmour, this shift in perspective becomes particularly evident in C. S. Lewis’s space fiction *Out of the Silent Planet*, which reflects his sympathy for animals and his concern that humans use their inherent power to pursue peace rather than violence which includes the monstrosity of hunting.

Writing from the field of sociology, Stephanie Medley-Rath and Lisa Lepard conduct a discourse analysis of selected Christian books and websites to show that Christian hunters not only interpret and justify their hunting activity from the Bible, they also use hunting as a means of practicing their faith. They also conclude that “hunting remains the purview of rural, white men” (142) and that the authors they surveyed viewed women hunters as an anomaly. A wider search could have included the views several well-known women hunters. For example, Mia Anstine is a well-known hunting guide, instructor, writer, and supportive member of many hunting associations and foundations. Vicki and Ralph Cianciarulo are prolific hunters and together have produced hundreds of Outdoor Channel video episodes to promote hunting as a

lifestyle. Both Mia and Vicki encourage women and girls to hunt and are outspoken about their Christian faith.

The intersection of Christian spirituality and hunting comes to focus in Dale Connally's treatment of six case studies of hunting ministries from which emerge common themes of passion for excellence, stewardship, formation of deep relationships, discipleship, and service. Attention to this personal side of hunting continues in Hill's essay "A Century of Hunting in the Stories of Texas Families" in which he analyzes the oral histories of multi-generational families.

The second half of the book shifts interest from the descriptive to the prescriptive, entirely comprised of professional academic contributions from those who argue whether sport hunting should be practiced at all and if so, under what conditions. The eight essays fall into two parts: the first devoted to arguments for and against the sport, the second to its character and conduct from Christian and ethical perspectives.

Two essays advance arguments against Christian sport hunting. Shawn Graves ("Killing and the Kingdom: A Case Against Sport Hunting") admits that his arguments reach "well beyond Christian belief" (253) as he opposes the killing of animals by anybody under any circumstances. His essay begins with a consideration of Christian theology with a focus on the presence of post-flood divine permission to eat animals. This provides the context for his reasoning that in the absence of strong moral justification for doing so, it is morally wrong for humans to kill animals whether for sport or otherwise. Premises for this conclusion include the perfectly loving nature of God who wishes to bring about as much good as possible for as many creatures as possible, the serious harm brought upon animals that are killed, and the basic right of animals to continued existence. His arguments also support a vegan lifestyle in contrast to those who, due to weakness and hardness of heart, give in to humanity's "clear bent toward destruction and violence" (259). Editor John White works entirely within a Christian framework of theology and what he calls the practice of "muscular Christianity" exemplified particularly in the Robertson family and their reality television show, *Duck Dynasty*. White's sociological exposition and critique of this masculine-gendered perspective toward "nonhuman animals" leads to his theological exposition of the doctrine of redemption and its Isaianic vision of the peaceable kingdom in which shalom defines the community that includes all living creatures. In agreement with Eric Dunning that sport hunting is a "male identity-prop," White concludes that sport hunting "misses the mark" of God's telos for humanity and is therefore immoral.

Two more essays defend the sport by appraising the theological and philosophical foundations of popular arguments against sport hunting. With penetrating clarity, philosopher Nathan Kowalsky takes on the work of theologian and anti-hunting animal-rights advocate Alan Linzey, characterizing his dualistic theological foundation as more akin to Gnosticism than Christian

orthodoxy.¹ Theologian Stephen Vantassel shows how animal protectionists appeal to Christian teaching to support their view that the dominion-mandate view of humanity's role in the world should give way to non-violent harmony between humans and animals. Showing a measure of agreement with Christian animal protectionists, Vantassel ultimately concludes that humans have divine permission to hunt, trap, and fish. In the end, the article does not render judgment about hunting for sport (the stated point of the book as a whole), choosing instead to pose moral questions about the relative cruelty of various methods for taking animal life and the proper limits of fair chase. The openness of this piece thus concludes the first four essays of this second half of the book which helps thoughtful readers to consider the strengths and weaknesses of prevailing positions.

Prior to Hill's concluding piece, four essays deal with Christian and ethical perspectives on sport hunting and the appropriate manner in which it should be conducted. Philosopher Gregory Clark takes up the questions at the end of Vantassel's essay, showing how "modern traditional hunters" are distinct from (mostly ancient) "hunter gatherers" who for sustenance depend on animals with whom they co-exist as members of the biotic community. Both groups, however, are essentially conservationists rather than conquerors. The division is instructive in that Clark's aim is to distinguish between the practices of war and hunting which ought not to be confused with one another.

Philosopher Theodore Vitali frames sport hunting as moral by detailing the ethics of fair chase. Rather than settling for theological treatments of Creation and Redemption, Vitali considers the formative role of the Incarnation which demonstrates not only the divine significance of life and death, but also of love.

James Tantillo successfully reaches beyond the discussion of hunting in general to consider its practice as a sport, concluding that it is a form of "deep play" in which the presence and necessity of death produce in the hunter what he calls "tragic wisdom", which is of immense human benefit, overriding the animal's own interest in life (392).

Just as the first half of the book ended with personal reflections, the essay by Waverly Nunnally (Professor of Early Judaism and Christian Origins) concludes the second half in subjective narrative fashion, explaining how his own development in bow hunting became a spiritually significant way to pursue excellence to the glory of God. His eight points of a "practical theology of bow hunting" model his own understanding of sport hunting as worship and helpfully encourage others to see how all legitimate activities can function in a truly doxological framework.

¹ NB: Despite this positive appraisal regarding the contribution from Nathan Kowalsky who is editor of this journal, this review remains unbiased.

With its scholarly and thoughtful contributions from the disciplines of the so-called “ivory tower” to the recent oral histories and contemporary voices of Christian hunters, *God, Nimrod, and the World* certainly fulfills its objectives of providing “a window into the different perspectives held historically by Christians in relation to sport hunting and to hear new voices on the debate” (411). It showcases the varied complexities entailed in the foundations and practices of the sport and provides rich opportunity for readers to understand better and assess their own views on sport hunting, humanity, and God.

Contributors

Walter A. Abercrombie, Kenneth Bass, B. Jill Carroll, Steve Chapman, Ralph Cianciarulo, Gregory A. Clark, Dale Connally, Michel DeJean, Alastair J. Durie, Joshua P. Foster, Michael J. Gilmour, Shawn Graves, Bracy V. Hill II, Tammy Koenig, Nathan Kowalsky, Lisa M. Lepard, Stephanie Medley-Rath, W. E. Nunnally, Jase Robertson, Dennis Staffelbach, Jeremy S. Stirm, James A. Tantillo, Stephen M. Vantassel, Theodore R. Vitali C.P., Stephen H. Webb, John B. White, and Daniel Witt.

Robert Carlton Stallman