It has spread through religious discourse like an urban legend—a line that goes something like, “The commandment does not say ‘You shall not kill’; what it says is ‘You shall not murder.’” Like bad gossip, it has been repeated so many times that it is automatically taken for truth in many settings. This timely little book by Wilma Ann Bailey stands up to set the record straight on a topic that could not be more crucial at any time, but especially in these days when claims of moral absolutes abound concerning all kinds of human behavior except the most serious.

The first, and longest, chapter of the book begins with the observation that from 1960 to 1990 at least six new English translations of the Bible appeared that used the word “murder” rather than “kill” to translate Exod 20:13. As Bailey notes in her preface, there are two primary lines of argument used to support this change from the traditional King James rendering. The first involves references to other uses of the root word, פזר, in question. The second involves a perceived need for consistency within a sacred text that sanctions certain kinds of killings in other places (vii). Chapter 1 sets out to demonstrate that the first of these arguments is simply incorrect. Bailey begins with a discussion of the general difficulties of translation and moves on to an examination of the two English words in question, “kill” and “murder.” She is essentially correct that the definition in the
Oxford English Dictionary, which uses the phrase “unlawful killing,” is inadequate. The meaning of a legal term such as this “varies from one jurisdiction to another” (4). Of course, “murder” has common and even figurative uses that Bailey does not discuss. “Kill,” however, is still a much broader term in the English language.

Bailey turns next to the use of רצח in the Hebrew Bible. This root appears in finite verb forms thirteen times, as a participle three times, and in a noun form thirty-one times. She is most concerned with the verb forms, of which Exod 20:13 is one, and she carefully classifies their use as follows: four appearances in lists where the actions designated are ambiguous (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17; Jer 7:9; Hos 4:2); one occurrence where the action is performed by an animal (Prov 22:13); one occurrence that results form a court action (Num 35:29-30); one occurrence where a להנהנת enacts sanctioned vengeance (Num 35:26–28); one occurrence of unintentional killing; one occurrence of a charge against a person who benefited from a killing but did not directly perform the act (1 Kgs 21:19); one unclear occurrence (Ps 62:4); and three occurrences that clearly refer to murder (Hos 6:9; Ps 94:6; Deut 22:26). With this concluding list, Bailey has successfully dismantled the lexical arguments for the “murder” translation of Exod 20:13.

The consistency argument is more difficult to confront. Still, Bailey’s counterargument is largely successful. First, legal texts in the Bible likely come from many different sources, and there is no reason to assume that they take a uniform stance on difficult issues such as the taking of human life. Second, when texts demonstrate an apparent conflict, there are no clear criteria for deciding which gets to “trump” the other. The weakest part of her argument here is that the commandment concerning killing is more consistent with the others if it refers to a more common activity, killing, rather than a rare one, murder.

Having undercut the arguments for “you shall not murder” that involve the biblical data, Bailey next turns to examine how both translation and interpretation of Exod 20:13 has been handled within various religious communities that use the Bible. Chapters 2–5 take up, in order, evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism. In chapter 2 she demonstrates that evangelical Protestants routinely took a stance close to pacifism at the beginning of the twentieth century, but by the end of the century most had become more engaged in society and politics and had shifted to positions favoring capital punishment and militaristic nationalism. Bailey sees the simultaneous move from “Thou shalt not kill” in the KJV (the dominant evangelical Bible at the beginning of the century) to “You shall not murder” in the NIV (the dominant evangelical Bible at the end of the century) as anything but a coincidence.

Most mainline Protestant traditions did not begin the twentieth century with theological stances so close to pacifism, a fact that Bailey attributes to their frequent origins as state
churches. Thus, they did not move as far to arrive at their current positions on war and capital punishment. Their primary translations of the Bible did make the same move as those of evangelicals, however, from “kill” (RSV) to “murder” (NRSV), thus supporting the political positions of the majority of people within these traditions. The “non-state church mainline traditions,” such as the Disciples of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the American Baptist Church, generally take a less militant position on issues such as war and capital punishment.

Judaism has followed a similar pattern in its translation of the Torah into English, although the key change happened even earlier. The switch to “murder” at Exod 20:13 appeared in the 1917 translation of the Jewish Publication Society. Bailey cites a number of sources that refer back to the writings of Rashbam and Bekhor Shor in twelfth-century France. Both of these rabbis argued for a more restrictive understanding of the commandment as prohibiting “illegal killing.” She appropriately observes that for much of Jewish history debates over capital punishment and war were purely theoretical, since Jews possessed no state power to conduct these activities. The emergence of the new State of Israel in the middle of the twentieth century suddenly changed this dynamic. That this state is heavily militaristic but rejects capital punishment reveals a complexity in the understanding of issues related to this commandment.

For Catholicism, of course, this commandment is the fifth rather than the sixth, because of the different numbering scheme. This tradition is also the one that most stands apart from all the others in its interpretation and translation of the commandment. English translations from Douay (1609) to the New Jerusalem Bible (1985) have maintained “kill” in Exod 20:13. Catholic interpretation of this commandment has also remained more consistent than in Protestant traditions.

The lack of precision or accuracy at some points in the book may be bothersome. The Northern Baptist Church, which eventually became the American Baptist Church, did not “split from its southern counterpart during the American Civil War” (53). This split took place in 1845, although it was over issues related to slavery. Further, one might question why Southern Baptists are classified as “evangelical” while American Baptists are “mainline.” In a discussion of major biblical interpreters, Martin Noth and Brevard Childs are identified as “contemporaries,” even though about three decades separate their births and the bulk of Noth’s publications preceed the beginning of Childs’s publishing career. In some cases broad claims are made without any documentation. Two examples concern theological shifts in the Roman Catholic tradition. First, Bailey states that “The church developed ‘just war’ theory in order to theologically cope with the incongruity between biblical teachings and the desire of the state to wage war” (73). Second, she says that “During the twentieth century the Catholic Church softened its views on particular
issues such as capital punishment and war in ways that affected its reading of the ‘You shall not kill’ commandment” (74). The first of these seems likely to be true, while the second seems more questionable, but neither is supported by the kinds of documentation present in the chapters on Protestantism.

Bailey’s primary argument in the end is that the ambiguity of “kill” in English matches the ambiguity of הָרִים in Hebrew. The ambiguous nature of the Hebrew text provided room for conversation and healthy debate. “The ‘murder’ translation, on the other hand, truncates that discussion and gives permission for unspeakable evil to continue” (83). This book provides an important resource for reopening this conversation at a time when the world desperately needs it.