

October 2014

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Recommended Citation

Barton, David (2014) "Exodus 22:2 - The Bible and Self-Defense," *Liberty University Law Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu_law_review/vol8/iss3/6

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ARTICLE

EXODUS 22:2 – THE BIBLE AND SELF-DEFENSE

David Barton[†]

[The following article on the Bible and self-defense is reprinted with permission from David Barton. Mr. Barton is the founder and president of WallBuilders, a national organization dedicated to presenting America's forgotten history and heroes, and to emphasizing our Nation's moral, religious, and constitutional heritage. Mr. Barton's exhaustive research and scholarly writing, along with his library of tens of thousands of original documents from the Founding Era, have been invaluable in advancing a vigorous debate concerning the interpretation and application of the Second Amendment. The Editorial Board deeply appreciates Mr. Barton's gracious contribution to this Symposium Issue. Eds.]

Among the numerous civil laws God gave His people as He was establishing them as an independent nation was one concerning their own homes. He told them: "If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed" (Exodus 22:2). This verse authorizes homeowners to defend their dwelling; and if in the process of doing so they kill an intruder, they were not guilty in the eyes of God – there was no guilt for shedding the blood of the intruder.

This verse forms the basis of what is now known as the "Castle Doctrine." It was explained by Founding Father James Wilson, a signer of the Declaration and the Constitution and an original Justice on the U. S. Supreme Court, who declared:

Homicide is enjoined [required] when it is necessary for the defense of one's person or house. . . . [E]very man's house is deemed, by the law, to be his castle; and the law, while it invests him with the power, [places] on him the duty of the commanding officer [of his house]. "Every man's house is his castle . . . and if anyone be robbed in it, it shall be esteemed his own default and negligence."¹

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1. James Wilson, *The Works of the Honourable James Wilson*, Bird Wilson, editor (Philadelphia: Lorenzo Press, 1804), Vol. III, pp. 84–85.

In short, if you were robbed in your home, it was not the police's fault but your own, for God made you the commander of your "castle" – hence, the "Castle Doctrine."

Several other Bible verses affirm what God authorized in Exodus 22. For example, Jesus noted in Luke 11:21 that "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own home, his goods are in peace." And in the book of Nehemiah when lawless brigands were on the loose (4:11), God's people went about armed, and every man "had his sword girded at his side" (4:18).

Because self-defense is a Biblical right given to every individual, it is therefore an inalienable, or a God-given, right. Constitution signer John Dickinson defined an inalienable right as one "which God gave to you and which no inferior power has a right to take away."² John Adams agreed, explaining that inalienable rights are . . .

rights . . . antecedent to all earthly government; rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws; rights derived from the Great Legislator of the Universe.³

John Quincy Adams echoed this, avowing that man's inalienable rights are those "given him by his Creator" which can neither be taken from him by force nor transferred from him to anyone else; "hence the rights derived . . . are declared to be inalienable."⁴ In short, inalienable rights are God-given rights that belong to each and every individual, period.

The Founding Fathers established American government with the primary purpose of securing to every individual the right to practice his or her inalienable rights. As the Declaration of Independence announced:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men.

2. John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, R. T. H. Halsey, editor (New York: The Outlook Company, 1903), p. xlii, letter to the Society of Fort St. David's, 1768.

3. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), Vol. III, p. 449, "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," 1765.

4. John Quincy Adams, *An Oration Delivered Before the Cincinnati Astronomical Society on the Occasion of Laying the Cornerstone of an Astronomical Observatory on the 10th of November, 1843* (Cincinnati: Shepard & Co., 1843), pp. 13–14.

Three straightforward principles of American government are set forth in these words: (1) there is a Creator; (2) He gives certain inalienable rights to man; and (3) government exists first and foremost to secure to every individual the exercise of his or her God-given rights.

In addition to the rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (that is, the right to own private property) listed in the Declaration, the Bill of Rights lists other God-given rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, justice in the court system, and many more, including the Second Amendment “right to keep and bear arms” – i.e., the Biblical right of self-defense. Because this right was given by God, the Founding Fathers urged training for its possible use.

For example, signer of the Declaration and framer of the Bill of Rights Richard Henry Lee encouraged:

[I]t is essential that the whole body of the people always possess arms, and be taught alike, especially when young, how to use them.⁵

Americans were instructed from their earliest years in their exercise of rights, including that found in the Second Amendment. Thomas Jefferson therefore advised his young nephew (whom he had raised as a son):

A strong body makes the mind strong. As to the species of exercise, I advise the gun. While this gives a moderate exercise to the body, it gives boldness, enterprise, and independence to the mind. Games played with the ball and others of that nature are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind. Let your gun therefore be the constant companion of your walks.⁶

John Quincy Adams agreed. When sent overseas by President James Madison on a diplomatic assignment, he left his son, George Washington Adams, to be cared for by his brother. Concerned about the education of his nine-year old son, he wrote his brother:

One of the things which I wish to have them taught (and which no man can teach them better than you) is the use and management of firearms. This must undoubtedly be done with

5. Richard Henry Lee, *An Additional Number Of Letters From The Federal Farmer To The Republican* (New York: 1788), p. 170, Letter XVIII, January, 25, 1788.

6. Thomas Jefferson, *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies*, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, editor (Charlottesville: F. Carr, and Co., 1829), Vol. I, p. 287, to Peter Carr on August 19, 1785.

great caution, but it is customary among us, particularly when children are under the direction of ladies, to withhold it too much and too long from boys. The accidents which happen among children arose more frequently from their ignorance than from their misuse of weapons, which they know to be dangerous. . . . I beg you occasionally from this time to take George out with you in your shooting excursions – teach him gradually the use of the musket, its construction, and the necessity of prudence in handling it; let him also learn the use of pistols, and exercise him at firing at a mark.⁷

Adams is correct: accidents with youth and guns occur primarily because youth are unfamiliar with guns and how to handle them safely. Strikingly, guns were numerous in the Founding Era, and every citizen usually owned several, but historical records affirm that gun accidents during that period were almost non-existent.

The Second Amendment's "right to keep and bear arms" is the constitutional embodiment of the Biblical right of self-defense found in Exodus 22 (and other passages) – another of the many American rights rooted in Biblical teachings.

7. John Quincy Adams, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Worthington Chauncey Ford, editor (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), Vol. III, p. 497, to Thomas Boylston Adams on September 8, 1810.