

Why would an Atheist Write a Commentary on the Bible?

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I became an atheist at the age of eight. After one of my Hebrew-school teachers devoted a 90-minute class to recounting her experiences in a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War, I went home and read a lengthy encyclopaedia article on Nazi Germany. Within four hours of reading that article, I had irretrievably lost my belief in God. Over the years, my disbelief in God has become even more robust than my disbelief in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy.

However, unlike some atheists and most agnostics, I am hardly uninterested in God and religion. For one thing, my attitude toward God is not one of indifference; rather, it is one of revulsion. That attitude stems partly from my systematic study of the Bible for the past 40 years. Although my main areas of scholarly expertise are political and legal and moral philosophy—rather than theology or the philosophy of religion—my principal avocation since the early 1980s has been the writing of a commentary on the Bible. Why would an atheist engage in such an endeavour?

I began to read the Bible systematically in early 1982 because I wished to enhance my understanding of philosophy. From the mediaeval period through the early twentieth century, virtually every Western philosopher of any consequence presupposed that his readers were intimately acquainted with the Bible. While studying Philosophy as an undergraduate, I was particularly struck by the fact that nearly all the great figures of the early modern era—Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, George Berkeley, and so forth—were thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures. Their philosophical works invoke Biblical passages and characters with easy familiarity. Even the fervid atheist Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century displayed an impressive knowledge of the Bible. (Nietzsche's *The Antichrist* is a tour de force of Biblical exposition, however far-fetched some of it may be.) Thus, while I was still an undergraduate, I recognized that I could not fully understand many of the premier texts of the Western philosophical tradition without an excellent knowledge of the Scriptures.

I began to study the Bible systematically during my first year as a postgraduate. (For the first decade of that study, I devoted 2-3 hours every day to the endeavour. Thereafter, I have devoted 60-90 minutes to it each day.) I had acquired a pretty good knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures as a boy, but now I was setting out to read both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament with the eye of a philosopher. During the first 18 months, I read the Bible from cover to cover three times without writing anything beyond marginal annotations. Thereafter, however, I began to compose a passage-by-passage commentary to make sense of the text as I went along. The commentary—which for the first several years was handwritten—has now grown to approximately 3,600 pages. I have written it purely for my own edification, but over the years I have gradually polished it into something that might eventually be suitable for publication.

At very few junctures in my commentary does my atheism become apparent. Poking holes in Biblical claims about God is far too easy and is thus uninteresting. Instead, my commentary seeks to understand those claims from the perspectives of the people who advanced them. I am continually asking why the writer of some book of the Bible would think that the ascription to God of a certain property or command or action or accomplishment is so important. Very often, the answer to the question just broached is that the Scriptural authors were resolutely concerned to differentiate their God from the gods of surrounding peoples. For example, the Torah's prohibition on boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19, 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21)—a prohibition that is the basis of the strict separation between meat dishes and milk dishes in modern kosher cooking—is best explained by reference to the pagan fertility rites that were widespread in the ancient Middle East. Instead of deriving principally from hygienic considerations or from solicitude for animals, the Torah's prohibition almost certainly stemmed principally from a determination to distinguish sharply between the Hebrew religion and the neighbouring creeds whose adherents paid homage to fertility goddesses by sacrificing kids and calves in their mothers' milk.

My original aim of improving my understanding of Western philosophy has been realised. Though I do not write on the philosophy of religion, my study of the Bible has significantly shaped my thinking about a number of issues in the areas of philosophy on which I do write. Over the years, however, that original aim has come to be supplemented by other reasons for my avocation as a Biblical scholar. Such a pastime not only improves one's understanding of Western philosophy, but also greatly enhances one's understanding of Western culture more broadly. While the Bible has heavily influenced many philosophers, it has likewise heavily influenced countless artists and writers and composers (among others). Some of the richness of Western art and literature and music is lost on anyone who does not possess a good knowledge of the Scriptures.

Let me offer a single fine-grained example to underscore this point. In the famous scene in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* where Alec d'Urberville rapes or seduces Tess, Thomas Hardy writes as follows: 'But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was on a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked'.¹ Now, unless readers know that the phrase 'ironical Tishbite' refers to Elijah, and unless readers are familiar with the story of the confrontation between Elijah and the Baal-worshippers in 1 Kings 18, they are likely to miss the full ironic significance of Hardy's wording. (Indeed, they will probably be rather puzzled by his wording.) In particular, they will not readily grasp that Hardy in his brief discussion of God's providence—the providence of her simple faith—was redirecting against God a classic and sardonic expression of disbelief in the existence of an alternative deity.

A further benefit of Biblical study lies in the literary magnificence of many parts of the Scriptures. The exquisite story of Joseph and his brothers in the final quarter of Genesis is itself sufficient to ensure the Bible a place among the greatest works of world literature, yet a number of other Biblical narratives—such as the story of David and Absalom, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son—are at almost that same level of supreme excellence. Much of the Bible's poetry (in Job, quite a few of the Psalms, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, the Song of Solomon, and so forth) is among the finest produced in any language. Thus, although long stretches of the Bible are tedious or repellent or baffling, a student of the Scriptures encounters many literary jewels as well.

Familiarity with the Bible broadens one's mind in a number of respects. Coming to grips with cosmological assumptions and ethical assumptions very different from one's own is an edifying venture. Moreover, anyone who examines the Bible with intellectual honesty cannot fail to be aware of its many shortcomings, some of which are egregious. One's awareness of those shortcomings can temper one's criticism of other religions. Consider, for example, the current propensity of Muslim extremists in various parts of the world to engage in murderous mayhem. On the one hand, the claim that their evil acts of carnage have nothing to do with Islam is simplistic at best. Anyone who has perused the Koran with intellectual honesty will be aware of the hideous passages on which the Islamist fanatics can and do seize in order to 'justify' their terrorism. On the other hand, the perception of a basic divide between the Koran and the Bible in this respect is likewise simplistic. The Bible teems with as many ghastly passages as the Koran. It lends itself to being cited in support of iniquities just as readily as does the Koran. Hence, given that there are no grounds for thinking that the sacred texts

of Christianity and Judaism are indissolubly linked to terrorism, there are no grounds for any corresponding accusation against the sacred texts of Islam. An acquaintance with the Bible enables one to recognize this point clearly.

The abundance of rebarbative passages in the Bible is another reason for atheists to familiarise themselves with it. Although my commentary seldom gives voice to the atheistic repugnance that I feel toward God, my systematic study of the Bible has made me thoroughly familiar with the numerous discreditable aspects of the Biblical texts. Thus, I can retort knowledgeably to believers who suggest that moral principles are in need of God and the Scriptures as their foundations. Even if the correct basic principles of morality were somehow in need of foundations beyond themselves, the Bible would be too nefarious for the purpose. Those principles would not be strengthened by being associated with the genocidal directives of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, or with the scurrilous fulminations of Christ against his opponents, or with the Stalin-like gloating of the God of the New Testament at the thought that everyone who has not been sufficiently deferential toward Him will suffer torture for all eternity.

Lest the foregoing paragraph may seem too glum, I shall conclude with a relatively light-hearted reason for studying the Bible. A survey of the Biblical texts reveals a host of common sayings that have taken on meanings very different from their original meanings. Hence, a knowledge of the Bible is invaluable for anyone inclined to be pedantic. I could offer more than twenty examples of the sayings that I have in mind, but I have space here for only a few.

In Deuteronomy 8:3 and in Matthew's and Luke's gospels (with Christ's response to the first temptation), we encounter the aphorism 'Man does not live by bread alone'. In the present day, that maxim is almost universally taken to mean that bread is necessary but not sufficient for human flourishing. In its original Biblical context, by contrast, the maxim means that bread is sufficient but not necessary for human flourishing. (In Deuteronomy, bread was unnecessary because God sent manna instead; in the gospels, bread was unnecessary because Christ was able to survive on purely spiritual sustenance.)

Another expression almost universally used today with a meaning markedly different from its meaning in its original Biblical context is the claim that certain people are—or behave as if they are—'a law unto themselves'. When such a formulation is invoked today, it is almost always employed disapprovingly to indicate that certain people arrogantly regard themselves as unbound by the legal or moral restrictions that apply to other people. However, when Paul coined that phrase in his Letter to the Romans 2:14, he was using it commendatorily with reference to righteous Gentiles. Those Gentiles conducted themselves in accordance with the moral requirements of God's Law even though the Law had never been revealed to them through the Scriptures. Such people were not in need of any acquaintance with the Scriptural presentation of the Law, because they were 'a law unto themselves'.

One further example of a saying that has taken on a meaning at odds with its original Biblical meaning is the assertion that 'the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing'. In contemporary usage, such an assertion indicates that some endeavour or situation has become muddled as a result of a dearth of coordination between different individuals or between different components of an organisation. Quite dissimilar was the message of Christ when he

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess d'Urbervilles* (Broadview Press 1996) 103.

enjoined his followers in the Sermon on the Mount to refrain from making public their charitable deeds: 'But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Matthew 6:3-4). Christ was counselling his disciples that they should not ostentatiously exhibit their virtues in order to win the esteem of their contemporaries. Instead, they should be so modestly discreet in their almsgiving that even their left hands would not know what their right hands had doled out.

To be sure, the Bible is by no means the only source of commonly misconstrued adages. Shakespeare's works, which are another preoccupation of mine, are likewise such a source. (For example, Hamlet's remark about 'a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance' is hardly ever quoted in accordance with its original meaning.) Still, precisely because the Bible has wielded such an immense influence on virtually all aspects of Western culture, it is a uniquely rich provenance of sayings that have entered into everyday discourse. And because the Bible today is much more often echoed than read, its sayings are frequently misunderstood. Thus, I recommend Biblical study not only for the serious reasons recounted above, but also because it is a wonderful basis for pedantic one-upmanship!