

Dangers of reading the Bible too literally and advantages of more scholarly approaches

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This short essay will consider the disadvantages, for believing Christians and Christianity, of reading the Bible in a very literal way, and the advantages of more scholarly approaches. The overarching danger of excessively literal reading is that erroneous meanings and conclusions are drawn from such a reading and these conclusions may, if acted upon, produce adverse outcomes for the reader and possibly for wider society. Conversely, the advantages of studying the Bible from an informed and scholarly position are that the reader will then more accurately determine the meaning of what is written, together with an appreciation that more than one meaning is possible for a particular passage. Furthermore, the scholarly reader is likely to be more open to new insights and changes in interpretations of the text.

In recent years, the question of literalist reading of the Bible has become an issue of public prominence and controversy due to the emergence of a so-called “New Atheism” movement. This is promoted by popular writers and polemicists of whom Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett are recognised as leading figures¹. These writers seek to convince the public to abandon religious belief. A major tactic of such writers is to take a literal reading of the Bible and demonstrate that this reading is irrational or morally objectionable. A frequently used example being the creation stories in the book of Genesis that explain the creation of the heavens, earth, plants, animals and humans as happening in 7 days². This is not compatible with the observations and conclusions of modern science which has demonstrated that the earth was formed about 4.5 billion years ago, and that plants, animals and humans evolved over hundreds of millions of years (and are

¹ Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (New York N.Y. Random House, 2019).

² Genesis 1. and 2.

still evolving)³. Thus, an immediately apparent danger of a very literal reading of the very first chapters of the Bible leads to an irreconcilable conflict between rational science and the Bible. For the “New Atheists” this is a powerful argument for the irrationality of religion. For the uncommitted person this may deter any exploration whatsoever of the Bible and what it may have to offer. For a nominal believer this may convert them to unbelief. For a believer who reads the Bible in a very literal way it may cause them to reject modern science (which is detrimental on an individual or collective basis) or it may leave them in a state of confusion. Thus, the necessity of a scholarly reading now become apparent. Modern biblical scholarship explains that the stories in the early chapters of Genesis are not literal history⁴. Their genre is that of myth (in the traditional sense that myth is an ancient story which seeks to explain the origin of certain observed or perceived realities). Moreover, there are two different creation stories skilfully joined together. They come from at least two distinct oral traditions that were collected and written down at different times and with later editorial revisions. Since the stories are myth, they are not history, neither are they science and there is no conflict between modern science and these stories. Indeed, the meanings modern scholarship takes from these stories are theological meanings: that there is but one God, and this God made the earth, sun, moon, plants and animals. How he made them is not what the stories are trying to convey, that question is better answered by scientific scholarship.

The controversies fuelled by the New Atheists encouraged newspapers to accept articles defending Christianity. These tend to take a more scholarly approach to and frequently present literalist reading as a relatively new phenomenon⁵. This has even been claimed by scholars⁶. However the issue of literalist Bible reading and its deleterious effects has probably always been present. It was certainly a problem for Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD). In his “Confessions” he reports that he was unable

³ Claude J. Allgre and Stephen H. Schneider, ‘Evolution of Earth’ Scientific American, July 1, 2005. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/evolution-of-earth/> [Accessed:13th January 2020].

⁴ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, (New York,N.Y./Mahwah, N.J. Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 109-132.

⁵ Wil Gafney, ‘The Risk of Biblical Literalism’, *The New York Times*, 15th August 2013. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/08/15/should-creationism-be-controversial/the-risk-of-biblical-literalism> [Accessed 13th January 2020].

⁶ Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches*, (London U.K., SPCK, 2004), p. 100.

to accept Christianity due to his literalist reading of the Bible⁷. It was only after encountering the figurative and spiritual interpretations of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, that he was able to accept Christianity as rational. Perhaps because of this personal experience, Augustine was very critical of literal readings that contradicted known facts about Nature. His concern was that such readings would deter people from accepting the Christian faith⁸.

Returning to the present; “The God Delusion” is a bestselling book by Richard Dawkins⁹ (one of the leaders of New Atheism). In this influential book, Dawkins writes about the violence attributed to God in the Biblical stories of Noah, the Battle of Jericho and other episodes and calls Yahweh an “evil monster” and a “cruel ogre”. This issue of God-sanctioned-violence in the Bible is probably the most difficult of the various problems Christians themselves find in reading the Bible. The problem is almost as old as the Christian Bible itself. It is therefore unsurprising that Dawkins would exploit this area. Many Christians deal with this issue by ignoring or neglecting the Old Testament, preferring to concentrate on reading the New Testament. In doing this, they unconsciously echo Marcion of Sinope (around 85-160 A.D.). He considered that the God of the Old Testament fell short of the morality of the God revealed by Jesus. He therefore concluded that there were two Gods and that the God of the Old Testament had nothing to offer Christians. He proposed a Biblical Cannon for Christianity that excluded the Old Testament¹⁰. This is a very poor solution because it is not possible to understand Jesus and the New Testament apart from the Old Testament. Maricon’s proposal was rejected by mainstream Christianity but today many Christians, in all denominations, behave as though it had not been. This demonstrates another danger of very literal reading - it can promote ignorance in believers of about 2/3 of their own Bible. Other Christians try to solve one literalist problem by resorting to another literalist interpretation which is, itself

⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, (London U.K. Penguin Classics, 1961) Book V Chapter 14 and Book 6 Chapter 5.

⁸ Saint Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis: translated by J. H. Taylor*, (Mahwah N.J. Paulist Press, 1982), Volume 1, Book 1 Chapter 19 Paragraph 39.

⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), pp. 248 - 250.

¹⁰ George T. Montague, *Understanding the Bible*, (New York, N.Y./Mahwah, N.J. Paulist Press, 2nd Edition, 2007), page 29

problematic. For example, God commands the extermination of all men, women, children, and animals in Jericho and the Israelites carry this out¹¹. In attempting to reconcile this massacre with a just and loving God, those who read the Bible in a very literalist way refer to verses which say that the inhabitants (the Canaanites) had become so wicked that the land had become defiled and God purifies the land by removing the inhabitants¹². This is still a poor solution because the children and animals were innocent of wickedness and their killing is repugnant. A very large danger to Christians from literal interpretations of these stories is the danger of increasing their tolerance for violence and war.

The discomfort Christians experience in reading the violence commanded in the Old Testament is a result of their commitment to the words of Jesus who commands love of enemies¹³. Just as the problematic nature of violence in the Bible was appreciated from the earliest times, so were early scholarly ways of dealing with it. Origen of Alexandria (184-253 A.D.), renowned for his allegorical interpretations of the Bible¹⁴, likened the destruction of the walls of Jericho to the crushing of personal vices.

Modern scholarly approaches offer possible solutions to the contradictions and ethical dilemmas just outlined. Firstly, the Bible is read as a whole; the violent passages are not considered in isolation. Secondly, it is recognised that there is a progressive increase in moral standards through the Biblical timeline. Thirdly that the fullness of revelation and moral standards is found in Jesus. It can therefore be argued that the Old Testament reported an incomplete stage of understanding and God does not condone genocide (or other violence). Modern scholarship would say that the stories in Joshua (and similar stories elsewhere) are not strictly history but include the genre of legend¹⁵. The stories existed as oral tradition for hundreds of years before being written and edited as we have them today. They are at least exaggerated, and many may never have happened. The stories were collected and

¹¹ Joshua 6. 17-21.

¹² Leviticus 18. 24-28.

¹³ Matthew 5. 44 and Luke 6. 27.

¹⁴ George T. Montague, *Understanding the Bible*, (New York, N.Y./Mahwah, N.J. Paulist Press, 2nd Edition, 2007), pp. 32-38.

¹⁵ Edesio Sanchez Cetina, 'Josua', in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 526.

edited for theological purposes¹⁶. The purpose being teach that Israel was successful only because God was helping them and that if the and when Israel abandoned God he would cease helping them win battles. Today discerning Christians would see the battles in Joshua in prophetic and spiritual terms. They foreshadow the victory of Christ and the spread of Christianity throughout the world. They foreshadow Christ's final victory at the second coming and they encourage the individual believer in their battle against sin.

Turning to the New Testament, very literal reading produce problems here as well. One source of difficulty arises from there being four different Gospels. Each one reports upon the life of Jesus, but they do not all agree on every point. A particular area of diversion is found in the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke (Mark and John do not report the birth and childhood of Jesus). The two stories disagree on many points. They agree that Jesus was virginally conceived by Mary while she was betrothed to Joseph, but before they were married. They agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that supernatural manifestations surrounded the birth (but each Gospel concentrates of different manifestations). Beyond that the stories are very different. Matthew seems to have the family already living in Bethlehem where Jesus is born. The family is visited by Maji from the East. This alerts Herod to the birth, and the family flee to Egypt to avoid a massacre of recently born infants ordered by Herod. Luke, on the other hand, has Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth and travelling to Bethlehem to take part in a census of the population. Jesus is born in Bethlehem and the family is visited by local shepherds. They then peacefully return to Nazareth. There is no mention of any flight to Egypt. Modern scholars point to a compound of historical mistakes in Luke's account¹⁷. He has Herod and Quirinius in power contemporaneously whereas Herod died in 4 B.C. and Quirinius came to power in 6 A.D. Furthermore, scholars find no evidence of a widespread census at this time.

¹⁶ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, (New York, N.Y./Mahwah, N.J. Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 196-197.

¹⁷ Robert J. Karris, 'The Gospel According to Luke', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland Murphy O.Carm (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 682-683.

The discrepancies and contradictions within and between these two accounts is often portrayed controversially in television programmes around Christmas time. The biggest danger here is that a very literal reading and concentration on the errors will unsettle and disturb the faith of ordinary Christians. Perhaps leading to a complete rejection. There is also the associated danger that it may deter people from even beginning to consider what Christianity has to offer. The contradictions and errors in historicity can be adequately answered by scholarly readings (and can be faith enhancing) but explaining them takes time and patience both of which are in short supply. And television executives do not offer them to their public! These nativity narratives are not intended to offer precise historical accounts. The Gospels were written by followers of Jesus. Thus, they know a great deal about his life of active ministry but not much before that. In the infancy narratives, Mathew and Luke independently take what is known and weave it into narratives with a theological purpose – to show that Jesus fulfils the prophecies of a coming Messiah and to prepare the reader for the kind of life Jesus will lead in the life of ministry, and peoples various reactions to this¹⁸. In a narrative environment they act much as a prelude to an opera acts in a music environment.

In conclusion: overly literal readings of the Bible can be dangerous for committed Christians and the wider community because they may miss, and occasionally distort, the meanings in the text intended by the authors (both God and the human authors). When certain passages of the Bible are taken as literal history or science they can be at variance with known secular scholarship and leave Christians open to ridicule. They may dissuade non-Christians from engaging with Christianity. These traits are also true for certain violent episodes in the Bible that are said to be sanctioned or commanded by God. However, in this case there is a danger of committed Christians seeing God as angry and vengeful rather than loving and forgiving. They might also be persuaded that war and violence are legitimate options whereas the rest of the Bible encourages love of neighbour and not returning evil for evil¹⁹. Here we have an examples of contradictions within the Bible and literal readings are unlikely to be able to resolve contradictions. However, more scholarly

¹⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, (Collegeville Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1979), pp. 1-9

¹⁹ 1 Peter 3. 9., Luke 6. 28, Proverbs 20. 22.,

readings have the capacity to ameliorate contradictions. More informed readings can also resolve historical and scientific disagreement between secular knowledge and Bible texts to provide the reader with greater confidence in the text and, often, more valuable insight into the meanings contained therein.

2,121 Words excluding footnotes.