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Author(s) William J. Hamblin

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Abstract Review of *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007), by Christopher Hitchens.

The Most Misunderstood Book: christopher hitchens on the Bible

William J. Hamblin

Review of Christopher Hitchens. *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.* New York: Twelve, 2007. x + 307 pp., with index. $24.99.

> There is an "apparent tendency of the Almighty to reveal himself only to unlettered and quasi-historical individuals in regions of Middle Eastern wasteland."
>
> Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 98

Like most antitheists, Hitchens simply cannot countenance the Bible. The fact that the Bible is nearly universally recognized as one of the most influential books in history—transforming Western art, architecture, philosophy, science, law, literature, poetry, music, and so on—does not move Mr. Hitchens. So strongly does his antitheistic prejudice jaundice his view of this world masterpiece that the most positive praise he can muster is to acknowledge that an occasional "lapidary phrase" or "fine verse" can be found in the Bible (p. 107). Any really good ideas, however, have been better put in other books. Even the few good parts of the Bible, you see, are now rendered superfluous by literature and philosophy (p. 283).

Hitchens's argument with the Bible, however, is not really aesthetic but atheological. The problem for the antitheists is not that the Bible

In the title I follow hitchens's new atheist capitalization rule that makes capitalizing proper names optional.

is taken seriously as literature, moral philosophy, or even history, but that it is taken seriously as revelation. In attempting to undermine its revelatory authority, antitheists like Hitchens often practice overkill by denouncing just about everything to do with the Bible. Whatever problems Hitchens purports to discover in the Bible in terms of historicity, disputed authorship, barbaric morality, or antiquated science can be equally found in Homer, for example. Yet we never see overwrought antitheists wringing their hands in distress and writing books exposing the supposed absurdities of the *Iliad*. Here, again, the driving force of an antitheistic ideology can be seen controlling Hitchens's paradigm and approach to the Bible.

While the Bible is undoubtedly the most widely read book in history, it is also the most widely misunderstood. Bible interpretation began almost from the time the earliest texts were written; indeed, parts of the Bible interpret earlier biblical passages, and the Dead Sea Scrolls are filled with commentaries and interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. By the time of Christ, biblical interpretation had become sophisticated and very diverse, with different schools of interpretation ultimately developing into different denominations among both Christians and Jews.[1] Unfortunately, we find nothing of this nuanced complexity in Hitchens's view of the Bible: the Old Testament is a "nightmare," and the New "evil."[2] Remarkably, as we shall see, Hitchens's approach to the Bible makes little attempt to come to grips with the book's original Iron Age context. While his diatribes against the Bible tell us a great deal about Hitchens, they tell us very little about the Bible itself.

Although scholars have identified a number of different paradigmatic approaches to the Bible, Hitchens reduces this complexity to binary opposition: the Bible must be either utterly inerrant or

1. Alan J. Hause and Duane F. Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), and *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), with two volumes still forthcoming; Martin J. Mulder and Harry Sysling, eds., *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004). Gerald L. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), gives an overview from Christian perspective.

2. From the titles of chapters 7 and 8, pp. 97, 109.

completely bogus. No middle ground exists for an inspired though errant text. In this he is paradoxically in thrall to the fundamentalist assumptions he so vividly vilifies. That is to say, throughout his book he argues against fundamentalist presuppositions and interpretations while ignoring—or at best (and rarely) downplaying—the fact that there are many nonfundamentalist responses to the issues he raises. In this extreme position Hitchens in fact follows the *minority* of even secular scholars. Hitchens rarely engages moderate positions, thus making much of his book a straw-man exercise.

Although there are many variations in the details of interpretation, four major paradigms for biblical interpretation can be identified.[3]

1. The Bible is inerrant in its history, science, and spirituality; it is the literal revealed word of God.

2. The Bible is basically historical and inspired, but it is not inerrant and must be read as a document of the Iron Age Near East in which its inspired spiritual message must be contextualized.

3. The Bible, at least after the founding of the kingdom of Israel, is essentially historical but includes many nonhistorical myths and legends; its spiritual message, while potentially meaningful, is no more significant than that of other great works of literature or philosophy. (Paradigms 2 and 3 are often quite similar in their outward approach to archaeological and historical questions but differ, for example, as to whether the book of Isaiah was inspired by God or is merely a human text.)

4. The Bible is fundamentally nonhistorical; its moral message is often primitive and has been transcended in modern times, and whatever good may be found in it has been better expressed in other works of law, science, philosophy, and literature. This is the position that

3. For a moderate inerrantist approach, see Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). The moderate historicist position, broadly accepted by most scholars, is outlined in William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); he reviews the major minimalist literature on pp. 23–52. For the minority minimalist views, broadly followed by Hitchens, see Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Basic Books, 1999).

Hitchens takes, which, it must be emphasized, is the *minority* view among biblical scholars—even if we exclude the inerrantist position (no. 1 above) from consideration.

The belief in biblical inerrancy as generally understood by Protestant fundamentalists in fact developed in the nineteenth century. It is thus rather late in the history of biblical interpretation. The reality is, however, that one does not have to believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture in order to believe in God or that the Bible is inspired. Indeed, it could be argued that rejection of biblical inerrancy actually increases potential arguments in favor of inspiration.

Tradire è Tradure

There are two primary rules that one must follow when trying to understand the Bible (or, for that matter, any other text that has been translated from a foreign language). First, one must accurately understand what the text has to say, which generally entails reading the text in the original language. Second, one must contextualize the text in its original setting—that is to say, read it in the context of the culture, history, values, science, and social norms from which the text derives. Time and again Hitchens violates these two rules by misrepresenting what the biblical text has to say and reading it as if God were trying to speak directly to an early-twenty-first-century liberal atheist journalist rather than a three-thousand-year-old subsistence-level farmer or nomad. God, at least, has the good sense to adapt his message to his audience, though Hitchens regularly condemns him for daring to speak to "illiterates" (pp. 114–15, 124). (God, apparently, should have had the wisdom to at least have spoken to a *journalist*.)

Remarkably, Hitchens is overtly disdainful of the careful reading of ancient texts in their original languages. He bemoans the supposed fact that "*all* religions have staunchly resisted *any* attempt to translate their sacred texts into languages 'understood of the people'" (p. 125, emphasis added). This is a stunningly erroneous claim, betraying almost no understanding of the history of religion. In reality, the translation of religious texts has been a major cultural phenomenon in ancient and medieval times and has steadily increased through the

present. The Bible, of course, is the most translated book in the history of the world. According to the United Bible Societies, it has been translated into 2,167 languages, with another 320 in process.[4] And this is by no means merely a modern phenomenon. The Bible was also the most widely translated book in the ancient world. It was translated into Greek (the Septuagint, second century BC), Aramaic (Targum, by the first century BC), Old Latin (second century AD), Syriac (Peshitta, third century AD), Coptic (Egyptian, fourth century AD), Gothic (Old German, fourth century AD), Latin (Jerome's Latin Vulgate, late fourth century AD), Armenian (early fifth century AD), Ethiopic (fifth century AD), Georgian (fifth century AD), Old Nubian (by the eighth century AD), Old Slavonic (ninth century AD), and Arabic (Saadia Gaon's version, early tenth century AD).[5] Thus, far from "staunchly resist[ing] any attempt to translate their sacred texts" (p. 125), Christians have consistently made tremendous efforts to translate their sacred books.

The translation history of Buddhist scriptures is *precisely* the same—and again, *precisely* the opposite of Hitchens's claim. The translation of Buddhist scriptures was the most widespread literary phenomenon in premodern Asia, with translations appearing in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, Japanese, Mongolian, Cambodian, Thai, Burmese, and other languages. Indeed, one could safely say that, after trade, Buddhist religious pilgrimages and scripture translations were the major factors behind cross-cultural exchange in Asia in the premodern period. The translation of Buddhist scriptures has continued apace in modern times by organizations such as the Pali Text Society.[6]

Hitchens uses the alleged failure of Muslims to translate the Qurʾan as a sort of poster child for his claims. "Only in Islam has there

4. http://www.ubs-translations.org/about_us (accessed 7 July 2009).

5. David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:787–851 (hereafter *ABD*), reviews the history of Bible translations from antiquity to the present. See also Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001). There are also surviving fragments of ancient translations of at least part of the Bible into several Iranic languages, such as Aghouanite, Pahlevi, Iranian, and Soghdian. See Michel van Esbroeck, "Les versions orientales de la Bible: Une orientation bibliographique," in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Joze Krasovec (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 399–509.

6. http://www.palitext.com (accessed 29 June 2009).

been no reformation," he assures us, "and to this day any vernacular version of the Koran must still be printed with an Arabic parallel text. This ought to arouse suspicion even in the slowest mind" (p. 125). Call me slow, but I'm not very suspicious—except of Hitchens's own claim. The earliest translations of the Qurʾan appeared within a couple of centuries of Muhammad's death. By the tenth century there were extensive commentaries (*tafsir*) on the Qurʾan in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish—the three great cultural languages of medieval Islamic civilization. These included a word-for-word grammatical analysis of the Arabic text, thereby providing translations. In the Middle Ages there were also numerous interlinear translations of the Qurʾan. In addition, the Qurʾan was translated by non-Muslims, largely for polemical purposes. It appeared in Greek in the ninth century, Syriac before the eleventh, and Latin in the twelfth. In fifteenth-century Muslim Granada in southern Spain there was even an Aljamrado Qurʾan, a translation into Spanish written in the Arabic script. By the nineteenth century the Qurʾan had been translated into Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, Bengali, Persian, Turkish, Balochi, Brahui, Telugu, Malayan, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, Swahili, and other languages. The translation of the Qurʾan continues in modern times, with the Saudi kingdom establishing the "King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qurʾan," which has sponsored the publication of the Qurʾan in twenty-seven languages, with many more in progress. These translations are published in both dual-language editions—with facing pages in Arabic and the translation—and, contra Hitchens, in the translated language alone.[7]

Hitchens is, of course, attempting to universalize a rather isolated phenomenon associated with very specific religious and political controversies regarding the translation of scripture during a brief period of the early Protestant Reformation in England. But even in this limited context, his argument is based on unsubstantiated assertion. "There would have been no Protestant Reformation," he assures us,

7. Hartmut Bobzin, "Translation of the Qur'an," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 5:340–58, http://www.qurancomplex.org/default.asp?l=eng (accessed 29 June 2009).

"if it were not for the long struggle to have the Bible rendered into 'the Vulgate'" (p. 125). Aside from the obvious fact that the term *Vulgate* refers not to translations of the Bible into vernacular languages but to the late-fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome,[8] translating the Bible into German as an issue of the Reformation is found *nowhere* among Luther's original Ninety-Five Theses. In fact, the Bible had been translated into German in the fourteenth century, and a German Bible had been printed by Gutenberg in 1466, only thirteen years after his publication of the Latin Bible in 1453! By the time Luther had nailed his theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church on 31 October 1517—the act that is generally regarded as the opening salvo in the Protestant Reformation—Gutenberg's German Bible was nearly sixty-five years old. The supposed struggle to translate the Bible into German did not have anything to do with Luther.

Turning specifically to the English Bible, various parts had likewise been translated into Anglo-Saxon from the seventh century on, with the Latin text interlined with Anglo-Saxon by the tenth century. The Venerable Bede (d. AD 735) is said to have translated the Gospel of John into Old English. The problem during most of the medieval period in the West was not that the church was attempting to suppress the translation of the Bible but that all literate persons in the early Middle Ages knew Latin, rendering translation superfluous. Priests would translate the Latin text into the vernacular languages during their sermons to the laity. Only with the rise of a literate laity *that did not know Latin* did the issue of vernacular translations of the Bible become an important one. And, even then, it was still assumed that serious biblical scholarship should be in Latin so that it could be universally read throughout Christendom. Even as late as 1305, Dante had to argue for the legitimacy of writing serious literature in Italian rather than Latin, as seen in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* ("On Vernacular Speech").[9]

8. Frank L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1710.

9. Steven Botterill, ed. and trans., *Dante: De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Thus, Hitchens's claim about religious restrictions on translating scripture is, in fact, an overgeneralization drawn from a narrowly focused issue during about a century of the early English Reformation. Hitchens laments that "devout men like Wycliffe, Coverdale, and Tyndale were burned alive for even attempting early translations" (p. 125) of the Bible into vernacular literature. The most charitable interpretation of this sentence is that Hitchens is confused. Far from being burned at the stake, John Wycliffe (1330–1384) died of natural causes while hearing Catholic mass in his parish church. Miles Coverdale likewise died unburned in 1568 at the age of eighty-one. Of the three translators mentioned by Hitchens, only William Tyndale (ironically also known as Hychyns, Hitchins, or Huchyns) was burned at the stake.[10] But Tyndale's execution in 1536 was as much for his opposition to Henry VIII's divorce—entailing what was viewed as a treasonous rejection of the Succession Act—as it was for his translation efforts. In other words, it was as much an act of political tyranny as it was religious oppression. As he does so often, Hitchens reductionistically generalizes from limited or even unique anecdotal examples to utterly unwarranted *universal* conclusions.

There is, however, excellent reason to insist that a complete and proper understanding of a text can only be obtained by reading it in the original language. As the Italians aptly put it: *tradire è tradure*—"to translate is to betray." As any scholar will tell you, in order to fully understand a text such as the Bible, the Qurʾan, the *Dhammapada*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, or the *Tao te Ching*, it must be read in the original language. Indeed, contra Hitchens, *all* major graduate programs in ancient or biblical studies require basic mastery of the original languages as the fundamental prerequisite to *enter* their programs.[11] In other words, you can't even begin to do graduate work on the Bible

10. Not wanting to put too fine a point on it—we are strongly and unequivocally opposed to burning people at the stake—Tyndale was not "burned alive" as Hitchens claims; he was strangled and his corpse was burned, which was, in fact, the typical procedure in such executions.

11. It is possible that Hitchens's own innocence of the sacred languages of the scriptures he professes to disdain can go far toward explaining his numerous flawed readings of the Bible.

until you've studied the relevant languages. Far from being a close-minded, regressive hindrance to understanding the Bible or the Qurʾan as Hitchens implies, traditional insistence on reading sacred texts in the original languages is intended to preserve the meaning of the text and facilitate proper exegesis.

Historicity and the Bible

Hitchens's hypercritical rejection of the essential historicity of the biblical narratives is based fundamentally on atheological rather than historiographical grounds. Logically, it should be sufficient for Hitchens to merely reject the authenticity of the biblical claims of divine revelation. Thus, it is quite possible that Jesus may have existed and yet not have been the Son of God. It is equally possible that ancient Israelites may have believed that God intervened in their history and recorded their perceptions of that intervention in the context of the actual historical events in which they lived. (In this, by the way, they would be no different from their Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, or Greek contemporaries.) If claims of supernatural events in a historical text are sufficient grounds for rejecting historicity, why does Hitchens not also reject, for example, the historicity of the Persian Wars because Herodotus describes divine revelation and intervention on behalf of the Greeks during those campaigns?[12] Only the Bible is singled out for such hypercritical rejection of its essential historicity in order to bolster the real argument: the atheological rejection of its supernatural claims.

A major flaw in Hitchens's approach is that his polemics utterly fail to properly contextualize biblical narratives. Hitchens describes the *akedah*—Abraham's "binding" or near sacrifice of his son Isaac—as "mad and gloomy" (p. 53), a "frightful" and "vile" "delusion" (p. 206). For Hitchens, "there is no softening the plain meaning of this frightful story" (p. 206) that God would require humans to sacrifice their children (pp. 109, 206–7). But is this the message the text would have conveyed to its early Iron Age readers? Quite the contrary: to an ancient

12. For example, Herodotus 1.46–55; 7.143.

reader, the story of the Akedah reveals that God *forbids* human sacrifice, accepting the substitutionary sacrifice of a ram instead. Thus, the Akedah narrative transforms both the nature and meaning of sacrifice for ancient Israelite readers when compared to the surrounding pagan societies. One will find none of the careful, nuanced biblical exegesis of Jon Levenson, for example, in Hitchens's assertions, and worse, not even a notice that such scholarship exists.[13] Unfortunately, a properly contextualized understanding of biblical narrative is sacrificed by Hitchens on the altar of his antitheistic polemic.

Likewise, in discussing the exodus, Hitchens dogmatically asserts: "There was no flight from Egypt, no wandering in the desert . . . , and no dramatic conquest of the Promised Land. It was all, quite simply and very ineptly, made up at a much later date. No Egyptian chronicle mentions this episode either, even in passing. . . . All the Mosaic myths can be safely and easily discarded" (pp. 102–3). These narratives can be "easily discarded" by Hitchens only because he has failed to do even a superficial survey of the evidence *in favor* of the historicity of the biblical traditions. Might we suggest that Hitchens begin with Hoffmeier's *Israel in Egypt* and *Ancient Israel in Sinai*?[14] It should be noted that Hoffmeier's books were not published by some small evangelical theological press but by Oxford University—hardly a bastion of regressive fundamentalist apologetics. Hitchens's claim that "no Egyptian chronicle mentions this episode [of Moses and the Israelites] either, even in passing" (p. 102) is simply polemical balderdash. Setting aside the fact that Egyptian chronicles almost *never* mention the defeat of a pharaoh—a fact that demonstrates, by the way, the superiority of biblical historicity with its very flawed and human kings—Egyptian chronicles do, in fact, mention nascent Israel in the famous "Israel

13. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

14. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a favorable analysis of the overall historicity of the Hebrew Bible traditions, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

Stele" (or Merneptah Stele) now in the Cairo National Museum.[15] It has been widely translated and photographed, and it is astonishing that Hitchens is unaware of it. It is also possible that Egyptian reliefs at the temple of Karnak in Luxor may depict early Israelites warring with Egyptians.[16]

Now it may be that Hoffmeier and other scholars who argue in favor of historicity are wrong in their interpretation of these matters. But even if this were so, it is irresponsible and misleading to claim, as Hitchens does, that "all the Mosaic myths can be safely and easily discarded" (p. 103). They can't. If they are to be discarded, it can only be after careful study. This is a complex topic meriting consideration of all the evidence, for and against, with sophisticated methodology and serious thought—something you will not find in Hitchens's brusque dismissal. It should also be emphasized that scholarly divisions over biblical historicity issues are by no means based on a party line ideological divide between believers and atheists. Agnostic William G. Dever, for example, is one of the leading proponents of essential historicity for much of the biblical narrative from the monarchic period onward, and for the authenticity of some of the conquest traditions as well.[17] Unlike Hitchens, serious biblical scholars don't simply dismiss these issues with a rhetorical wave of the hand based on their ideological predispositions.

Hitchens's account of Joshua's battle at Gibeon (Joshua 10) betrays a similar naïveté about the text of the Bible, ancient history, and archaeology. According to Hitchens, "the Old Testament is riddled with dreams and with astrology (the sun standing still so that Joshua can complete his massacre at a site that has never been located)" (p. 117). First, the "sun standing still" has absolutely nothing to do with astrology, which only developed in its full form centuries after the book of

15. William Hallo, *Context of Scripture* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001–2003), 2:40–41.

16. Frank J. Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16/5 (1990): 21–38.

17. William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), and *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

Joshua was written.[18] But, more importantly, Hitchens claims that the site where the battle occurred, Gibeon (Joshua 10:10–12), "has never been located" (p. 117). In reality, one can find it located in *any* atlas of the Bible, which Hitchens apparently couldn't be bothered to consult.[19] Under the entry for Gibeon, the authoritative *Anchor Bible Dictionary* tells us that it was "an important city of Benjamin, now identified with modern el-Jib . . . 8 km N[orth]W[est] of Jerusalem." Are the biblical scholars simply making this up, randomly associating ancient cities with biblical names? Quite the contrary, the site of Gibeon was conclusively identified when J. Pritchard's excavations at el-Jib uncovered "thirty-one jar handles inscribed with the name 'Gibeon' (*gbcn*) in ancient Hebrew script."[20] But what of the sun standing still? Isn't that simply impossible? Perhaps. On the other hand, it may simply be a rather extravagant epic poetic device to describe the longest day of the year, the summer solstice: the term *solstice* derives from Latin *sol* ("sun") and *sistere* ("to stand still"). But however one wishes to understand the story in Joshua, Hitchens remains confused; the story is not about astrology, and the ancient site has been clearly identified by inscriptions discovered by modern archaeology. Once again, Hitchens simply cannot be trusted to get the details right.[21]

The history of later Judaism fares no better under the pen of Mr. Hitchens. Take, for example, his discussion of "the vapid and annoying holiday known as 'Hannukah' [*sic*]" (p. 273). ("You're a mean one, Mr. Hitch!") Hitchens informs us that in celebrating Hanukkah, "the Jews borrow shamelessly from Christians in the pathetic hope of a celebration that coincides with 'Christmas'" (p. 273). This is a remarkable achievement, considering that the origin of the festival of Hanukkah, the "dedication" of the temple, antedates Christianity—indeed, Jesus

18. Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (New York: Routledge, 1994); *ABD*, 1:504–7.

19. For example, Y Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 44, map 56.

20. *ABD*, 2:1010, 1012.

21. Interestingly, Galileo, one of Hitchens's supposedly secularizing heroes (p. 270), wrote an exegesis of Joshua 10 claiming that the sun's standing still was evidence for a heliocentric rather than a geocentric universe! Eileen Reeves, "Augustine and Galileo on Reading the Heavens," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52/4 (1991): 563–79.

himself is said to have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Dedication (John 10:22)!

In a stunning case of blaming the victim, Hitchens informs us that the Maccabean revolt was an attempt to "forcibly restor[e] Mosaic fundamentalism against the many Jews . . . who had become attracted by Hellenism" (p. 273). In Hitchens's worldview, it seems to be just another case of evil "fundamentalists" (read: Jews who wanted to follow their religious traditions) oppressing benign "true early multiculturalists" (p. 273) (read: Jews who wanted to abandon their religion and become hellenized). Note, also, the anachronistic transposition of the concepts of modern "fundamentalist" and "multiculturalist"—not necessarily antonyms, by the way—onto the ancient world.

Now, it is true that during the first centuries around the time of Christ there was a significant minority of the Jewish elites who hellenized—that is, adopted Greek culture, language, customs, and so on. This hellenization took various forms. Many Jews—like Philo and Paul—believed they could accommodate the best of Hellenistic culture while remaining authentically Jewish. Others, disregarding their Jewish roots, simply became Greeks, abandoning their unique Jewish traditions (1 Maccabees 1:13–15).[22] But this alone is clearly not what caused the Maccabean revolt—after all, the Books of the Maccabees, which describe the revolt, survive only in Greek, not Hebrew, and are thus obviously products of the very hellenization that Hitchens claimed the revolt opposed.[23] The problem was not, as Hitchens declares, that fundamentalist Jews oppressed a minority of Jews who voluntarily hellenized. Rather, Antiochus IV (reigned 175–164 BC), a king of the Greek Seleucid dynasty that ruled much of the Near East in the second century BC, became the banner-bearer for the policy of *enforced* hellenization of the Jews. His anti-Jewish policies began with the plundering of the temple treasury in 169 BC (1 Maccabees 1:20–24). Two years later he captured and sacked Jerusalem, killing

22. Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

23. Jonathan A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976); and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Maccabean Revolt* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1988).

many Jews and enslaving others, thereafter establishing Hitchens's "true early multiculturalists"—collaborating hellenized Jews—as new puppet rulers of the city (vv. 29–34). Antiochus then ordered, under pain of death (vv. 50, 57), that all Jewish religious practices be abolished and Jewish books burned. Circumcision as a sign of the Jewish covenant with God was forbidden: "they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, along with their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the [circumcised] infants from their mothers' necks" (v. 61)—a policy that might have been applauded by a second-century-BC version of Hitchens, if he is serious in his claims that circumcision is tantamount to child abuse (pp. 223–26). Antiochus also ordered that idols and sacrifices to Greek gods be established in the temple (1 Maccabees 1:41–64). He further demanded that altars to Greek gods be set up in all Jewish towns and the Jews be forced to offer sacrifice there, sending Greek officers to ensure that the orders were carried out (vv. 54–55). "True early multiculturalists" indeed. According to Hitchens, this proto-holocaust—whose intent was clearly to destroy Judaism as an independent religion and culture, an objective that included the genocide of those who resisted—was merely a matter of hellenized Jews "agree[ing] to have a temple of Zeus on the site [of the Temple of Solomon] where smoky and bloody altars used to propitiate the unsmiling deity of yore" (p. 274).

Here is Hitchens's equally bizarre description of the spark that launched the revolt. "When the father of Judah Maccabeus [i.e., Mattathias] saw a Jew about to make a Hellenic offering on the old altar, he lost no time in murdering him" (p. 274). Well, sort of. What really happened was that officers of Antiochus came to Modein, a small village to the west of Jerusalem, built an altar to Zeus, and ordered all the Jews of the village to make sacrifice to Zeus under pain of death (1 Maccabees 2:15–18, 25; 1:50, 57). (Note this was not at the "old altar" of the temple of Jerusalem; Hitchens is confused.) Mattathias, a priest and leader of the village, refused to offer sacrifice under any circumstances (vv. 19–22). A terrified member of the village, however, started to submit to this coercion (v. 23). (Note this was not a multicultural hellenized Jew voluntarily worshipping Zeus. This was a terrified man

coerced into abandoning his religion and ethnicity under threat of execution. Hitchens is again confused.) At this point Mattathias killed the renegade Jew and the Seleucid officers (vv. 24–26) and launched the revolt. Once again decontextualizing the ancient text, Hitchens calls this act "murder." Perhaps. But in its ancient historical context, Mattathias, as priest and village leader, was fulfilling Jewish law by executing an apostate (Deuteronomy 13:7–10; 17:2–7). Now, one can argue the relative merits of the law's death penalty for religious apostasy, but from the ancient perspective, this was not an act of "murder" as Hitchens describes it, but the legitimate execution of a traitor.

Transposing this event by analogy into modern times, imagine Nazis coming to a Jewish village in Poland, profaning the synagogue, killing resisters, sending many to camps, and then demanding that surviving Jews salute pictures of Hitler to show their loyalty to the Führer. Would Hitchens similarly condemn Jews who resisted the Nazis or killed Jewish collaborators? Now, we have no desire to be apologists for the Maccabean regime, whose war atrocities, crimes, and incompetence are manifold. But Hitchens's description of the Maccabean revolt is such a blatant caricature that we are again forced to assume that his antitheistic bias so distorts his reading that he is simply incapable of presenting a balanced and accurate summary of biblical events. Since he has already concluded that religion is always "poisonous," he feels perfectly free to rewrite history so that it matches his theory.

For Hitchens all this is not merely some obscure, half-forgotten event in a backwater of the Hellenistic world. He believes that if only the Maccabees had failed, the Jews would have become hellenized and Christianity would never have existed at all.[24] "We could have been

24. Hitchens mistakenly claims that "the Romans eventually preferred the violent and dogmatic Maccabees to the less militarized and fanatical Jews," thereby perpetuating the "old-garb ultra-Orthodox" form of Judaism (p. 274). At this point no one should be surprised to learn that Hitchens again gets it wrong. In fact, the Romans ousted the Maccabees in favor of a highly hellenized puppet ruler, Herod the Great, who, in addition to rebuilding the Jewish temple, funded the building of pagan temples in his domain, including some to his deified patron, the Roman emperor Augustus. Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 183–85.

spared the whole thing," he laments. "The Jewish people might have been the carriers of philosophy instead of arid monotheism" (p. 274). Or, much more likely, the Jewish people would have simply ceased to exist, since of all the ancient Near Eastern peoples and cultures that fell under the influence of Hellenism, only the Jews and Zoroastrians have survived to the present with their ancient cultural identity intact, and this because of their unwavering devotion to their respective religions. Hitchens seems oblivious to the fact that Judaism is *not* a philosophy or a genetic ethnicity, but a *religion*. Hitchens's belief that the world would be a better place without the existence of Judaism as a vibrant, living religion is little short of shocking in light of the horrors of anti-Semitism of the past century. I am not, I must insist, implying that I believe Hitchens to be an anti-Semite; I suggest only that his antitheistic bias so blinds him that he can't seem to see the anti-Semitic implications of his belief—that the world would be a better place without religious Jews.

The Teachings of the Hebrew Bible

Hitchens's quarrel with the Bible begins on its very first page. Taking his cue from Protestant fundamentalists, Hitchens maintains that the author of the Genesis creation narrative should be held accountable for its differences with the thought of Darwin and Einstein (pp. 73–96). The overall significance and meaning of the biblical account, it appears, can only be judged in relationship to its compatibility with contemporary cosmological theories—a moving target, it should be noted. I, on the other hand, find it much more likely that the author of Genesis intended to engage the cutting-edge science of his *own* day—the early Iron Age—not scientific theories that would eventually develop some 3,000 years *after* his death. If we examine Genesis from this perspective, it reveals itself as a remarkably progressive scientific work. Unlike standard contemporary early Iron Age science, Genesis maintains that the planets, sun, and moon are not gods but are creations of God and are therefore susceptible like the rest of creation to the laws of nature. The fact that we still call the planets by the names of Roman gods—Mercury, Venus, Mars,

Saturn, and Jupiter—points to the once near universality of this belief in planets-as-gods. But Genesis will have none of this, being nearly unique in ancient science for its rejection of this claim. Through this rejection, the cosmology of Genesis is as revolutionary in its own way as were later heliocentric or Newtonian theories. Indeed, all modern astronomy still rests on the foundations of the astronomical insights found in Genesis—that planets are not sentient beings but are subject to natural law. Some, we suppose, might condemn God for not spontaneously revealing to Moses that $E = mc^2$—despite the fact that such a pronouncement would have been utterly incomprehensible to any early Iron Age reader. Others, however, might take solace in the fact that the Genesis creation narrative, when properly contextualized in its original setting, represents a major and enduring *scientific* breakthrough in its own right, in addition to its religious insights into God's relationship to the created order and humankind.

It is not just the early Iron Age science of the Bible that Hitchens finds offensive. The morality of the Bible, which many feel is foundational to Western civilization, is to Hitchens pure barbarism. But when we read Hitchens's claim concerning "the pitiless teachings of the god of Moses, who never mentions human solidarity and compassion at all" (p. 100), we are left to wonder if Hitchens has read the Bible he despises with any degree of earnestness whatsoever. The Hebrew Bible speaks frequently of God's compassion and his enduring "loving-kindness" or "steadfast love."[25] When Christ taught, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39), he was, in fact, quoting the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 19:18; see Zechariah 7:8). Furthermore, the law insists that Israelites must have compassion for foreigners as well for their own kinsmen (Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19). The prophet Hosea likewise taught that God preferred "steadfast love" over "sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). The teaching of Hosea 6:6 is commonplace throughout the Hebrew Bible, representing a standard

25. For example, Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 30:3; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 86:15; 112:4; 118; 145:8.

component of Jewish temple theology.[26] The essential idea is that the mere outward performances of the sacrificial rituals of the temple are worthless without an inward spiritual transformation of love and obedience. Hosea 6:6 is quoted by Christ in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7 and is probably alluded to in Mark 12:33 in relation to the two great commandments to love God and one's neighbor. Hitchens's claim that "the pitiless teachings of the god of Moses . . . never [mention] human solidarity and compassion at all" (p. 100) is stunningly erroneous.

For Hitchens the principles found in the law of Moses tend to be either transparently obvious (pp. 99–100) or barbarically "demented pronouncements" (p. 106). He objects to all sorts of things in the law, such as the "insanely detailed regulations governing oxes [*sic*]" (p. 100), which go on for an astonishing *five verses* (Exodus 21:28–32)! Actually, by ancient standards—for instance, when compared to the fourteen oxen regulations in Hammurabi's Code—this is notably succinct.[27] Considering that oxen were a major form of transportation in early agrarian Near Eastern societies, it is reasonable to expect some regulations about them; but, even if superfluous, there is nothing "insanely detailed" about it, especially when compared to our modern laws concerning vehicular manslaughter—probably the closest modern analogy. Hitchens really has no substantive point here beyond mere rhetorical bombast.

Part of the problem may be that Hitchens appears to have been reading (or more likely *not* reading) a very different Bible than the rest of us. This leads me to suspect that, like Chaucer's "doctour of phisik," Hitchens's "studie was but litel on the bible."[28] "Then there is the very salient question of what the commandments do *not* say," he intones. "Is it too modern to notice that there is nothing about the protection of children from cruelty, nothing about rape, nothing about slavery, and nothing about genocide?" (p. 100). Let's take each of his

26. 1 Samuel 15:22–23; Psalm 40:6–10; 51:16–17; Proverbs 15:8; 21:3, 27; Isaiah 1:11–20; 66:6; Jeremiah 7:21–26; Hosea 5:6; 6:6; 8:13; Amos 5:21–27; Micah 6:6–8.

27. Martha Tobi Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 124, 127–29, 224–25, 242–52, 262–63.

28. Chaucer, "Prologue," *Canterbury Tales*, line 438.

four issues about which the Mosaic law supposedly has nothing to say: protection of children, rape, slavery, and genocide.

Only in the case of child protection laws has Hitchens got it right, but then, only partly. Children are rarely mentioned in Israelite law because the laws deal with the interrelations of adult Israelites. The relations of children to parents were largely a private matter; parents were responsible for the good behavior of their children, and children were to honor their parents (Exodus 20:12), meaning that they were to obey them. Fathers had absolute authority over children, and intractably rebellious children *could* be put to death (21:17; Leviticus 20:9). (In this, Israelite law was no different from most contemporary cultures; a Roman father, for example, had the explicit legal authority to put his children to death or sell them into slavery.)[29] Such regulations, however, were apparently most honored in the breach, as the story of David and his murderously rebellious son Absalom demonstrates (2 Samuel 13–19). As with all traditional societies, parents were advised to strictly discipline their children, which could include corporal punishment.[30] Such practices might seem harsh by modern child-rearing standards, but they were typical of nearly all premodern societies. The parable of the prodigal son indicates, on the other hand, that reconciliation and forgiveness were also part of the normal relationship between children and parents (Luke 15:11–32). The Bible likewise speaks frequently of parental love for children;[31] God's love for Israel is compared to the love of a father for his children (Jeremiah 31:20)—something that would make little sense if Israelite fathers were generally abusive tyrants. Jesus famously taught that the kingdom of heaven belonged to little children (Matthew 19:14). Thus, though the nature of ancient societies meant that child welfare laws were generally not part of public law codes, being considered private matters, compassion and love for children is clearly an integral part of the biblical tradition.

29. The Twelve Tablets, Tablet 4; see J. Andrew Borkowski and Paul du Plessis, *Textbook on Roman Law*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

30. Proverbs 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13–14, 29:17; Sirach 30:1–13.

31. For example, Psalm 103:13, 127:3; Jeremiah 31:20; Matthew 2:18; 7:9–11; Luke 9:48.

Despite Hitchens's assertion, rape is discussed is some detail in Deuteronomy 22:23–29; and, of course, the command to not commit adultery obviously includes rape. Slavery is likewise widely discussed in the Mosaic law (Exodus 21; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15). The law provides the death penalty for those who kidnap people to sell them into slavery (Deuteronomy 24:7). Slaves could not be forced to work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10), a concept unique to the Bible, indicating that Hebrew slaves were better treated than those anywhere else in the Near East at the time. People sold into debt-slavery were to be freed after six years of servitude (21:2–4). All Israelite slaves were to be freed in the Jubilee year, thereby abolishing the possibility of perpetual servitude for the descendants of slaves (Leviticus 25:39–46). Although slaves could be beaten, a master killing a slave was considered guilty of murder and could be executed for his crime (Exodus 21:20), while a slave maimed by his master was to be freed (vv. 26–27). Runaway slaves were to be given protection and not returned to their masters (Deuteronomy 23:15–16). While we have no desire to be apologists for slavery in any form, it should be noted that the status of slaves in Hebrew law was in many ways superior to that of surrounding societies. Indeed, "we find in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake,"[32] which eventually laid the foundation for the worldwide abolition of slavery. But whatever one thinks of biblical slavery, for Hitchens to claim that the law of Moses contains "nothing about slavery" is preposterous.

Genocide is not explicitly mentioned in the Mosaic law because the term is a relatively recent one—developed, I might add, in response to the unique nature of the genocidal atrocities of *atheistic* regimes of the twentieth century. However, laws of warfare governing the treatment of enemies are quite explicit in the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 20:10–20; 21:10–14). During a war, cities must be given a chance to surrender; if they do, they become tributary states, but the property and lives of the citizens are protected (20:10–11). If a city resists and is captured by force, the men are massacred, the women and children enslaved, and the property becomes the spoil of the victors (vv. 12–15).

32. *ABD*, 6:65a.

Note that in its ancient context this should be viewed as a *limitation* on martial violence and the protection of noncombatants. From the modern perspective, the most problematic passage is where the Israelites are commanded to exterminate all of the six nations of the Canaanites.[33] The Amalekites were also placed under this same curse (*ḥerem*) of utter extermination because of their treacherous attempt to exterminate the Israelites while they were sojourning in the wilderness (Exodus 17:8–17; Deuteronomy 25:17–19). This practice could certainly be classified under the modern concept of genocide. From the ancient perspective, however, the Amalekites and the Canaanite tribes were understood to have engaged in a blood feud with the Lord himself and were therefore to be exterminated. It should be emphasized that in all of this the Israelite war code follows closely the contemporary laws of war of the Near East.

In reality, however, this type of *ḥerem* genocide seems to have rarely occurred. The Amalekites existed as a major enemy of Israel from the foundation of the nation until subdued—though not exterminated—by David (1 Samuel 30). King Saul was ordered by the prophet Samuel to kill all Amalekites captured in a battle, but he refused to do so, for which Samuel cursed him (1 Samuel 15). The city of Gibeon, of the cursed Hivite tribe, was not exterminated but made a treaty with Joshua (Joshua 9:7). The city of Jerusalem was inhabited by the cursed Jebusites (15:63; Judges 19:10; 2 Samuel 5:6) when David captured it by force; however, he did not exterminate the inhabitants since he later purchased the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite as the site for the future temple (2 Samuel 24:16, 18)—a place he could have taken by plunder during the conquest of the city. Uriah and Ahimelech, David's mercenaries, were of the cursed Hittite tribe (1 Samuel 26:6; 2 Samuel 11:3). Solomon married Canaanite women (1 Kings 11:1–2), and Canaanites were required to provide labor for Solomon's building projects (9:20–21). Thus the Canaanites obviously still existed and had not been exterminated by the Israelites. All surviving evidence

33. Deuteronomy 20:16–18; Numbers 31:16–18; the six nations are the Hittites (not to be confused with the Anatolian empire), Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

indicates that the law commanding the genocide of the Canaanites was rarely, if ever, practiced in ancient Israel. Indeed, many scholars believe that the genocide passage in Deuteronomy is, in fact, an idealized retrojection commanding the extermination of ancient peoples who no longer existed in the period when Deuteronomy was written.[34]

Be that as it may, we have no desire to attempt to legitimize biblical genocide. Yet biblical descriptions of massacres and enslavement of defeated peoples were well within the cultural norms and laws of war of ancient Near Eastern societies. For example, the Babylonians treated the Jews precisely this way when Judea and Jerusalem were conquered in 586 BC (2 Kings 24–25; Jeremiah 52). However horrific these events may have been, they were viewed by ancient contemporaries as a legitimate exercise of military power. This is in marked contrast to the mass genocide perpetrated by atheistic regimes of the twentieth century whose practices consistently violated all the norms of modern international relations and warfare. When biblical peoples perpetrated atrocities, they did so only in the context of what were then considered justifiable acts according to contemporary laws of war. None of their contemporaries faulted them for their behavior. Thus, all of the four topics supposedly ignored by the Mosaic law are in fact dealt with in some detail.

Hitchens's view of the Sabbath commandment as "a sharp reminder to keep working and only to relax when the absolutist says so" (p. 99) again fails to contextualize the text. In its ancient setting it should be seen as a progressive and humanitarian regulation ensuring that rulers and masters gave their slaves and laborers a day of rest (Exodus 20:10)—a practice that is apparently original to the Israelites[35]—rather than forcing them to work unremittingly. Though it goes unacknowledged, Hitchens owes his weekends and also the concept of a "right" to leisure to the God of Israel—no thanks required. Only by rhetorical

34. Many scholars associate the current form of Deuteronomy with the "book of the Law" discovered in the temple during the reign of Josiah in the late seventh century (2 Kings 23).

35. *ABD*, 5:850–51 reviews the various theories of extrabiblical origins of the Sabbath regulations, concluding that "the quest for the origin of the Sabbath outside of the O[ld] T[estament] cannot be pronounced to have been successful."

sleight of hand can Hitchens try to turn this blessing into an act of supposed tyranny.

Paradoxically, Hitchens then blames the Bible for "the notorious verses forfeiting 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth'" (p. 100).[36] In this the Bible is merely adopting the cultural norms of the ancient Near East, for this concept appears in the Law Code of Hammurabi.[37] Hitchens is also unaware of the fact that biblical law was intended to set the *maximum* allowable punishment. That is to say, if someone put your eye out, the *maximum* vengeance allowed was putting his eye out—you could not kill him. The purpose of the law was to ensure that punishment fit the crime, which became the foundation for this important concept in modern law. In societies such as those of the ancient Near East, where clan and personal vengeance and blood feud were rife, the *lex talionis* ("law of retaliation") was designed to *limit* violence. The law of Moses implied—and was so interpreted by Jewish tradition—that, except in the case of murder, monetary compensation could be offered for damages, as was frequently the case in other Near Eastern societies.[38] Most importantly, however, Israelite law established the principle that all people (though not slaves) were equal before the law: "you shall have one law for the foreigner and the citizen" (Leviticus 24:22). This is in sharp distinction to other traditional Near Eastern law codes in which the law often had a different application depending on social class and race.[39] Far from being regressive as Hitchens implies, biblical law—with its relatively humane treatment of slaves and its universal, equal application of the law—represented a significant advance over traditional personalization of justice through blood feuds and special legal status for the upper classes in ancient

36. Alluding to Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19–22; Deuteronomy 19:21.

37. Roth, *Law Collections*, 196–201, 121.

38. Numbers 35:31–32 insists that ransom *cannot* be accepted in place of execution for murder, implying that it *can* be accepted in other cases; the law was thus interpreted as permitting monetary compensation in all cases but murder. See Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), notes on p. 354 and notes to Exodus 21:23–25 on p. 154; see also *ABD*, 4:321–22.

39. See Roth, *Law Collections*, for numerous examples (e.g., p. 121).

Near Eastern societies. In all of this Hitchens also ignores Jesus's interpretation of this part of the law (Matthew 5:38–42).

From all we can tell, Hitchens has apparently made no serious effort to understand the original historical meaning of the law of Moses, precisely because in his view religion is sheer lunacy and thus has *no* meaning in any ultimate sense. For him the search for meaning in religion has all the consequence of searching for meaning in the ravings of a lunatic. His failure to try to understand religion with even the slightest degree of sympathy fatally undermines his entire enterprise. His pronouncements on the meaning of the Old Testament should not be taken seriously.

Jesus and the "Evil" New Testament

> There were many deranged prophets
> roaming Palestine at the time [of Jesus].
> Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 118

For Hitchens "the 'New' Testament exceeds the evil of the 'Old' one" (p. 109), a very difficult feat indeed, considering Hitchens's scorn for the Old Testament. His basic argument is that "the case for biblical consistency or authenticity or 'inspiration' has been in tatters for some time, . . . and thus no 'revelation' can be derived from that quarter" (p. 122). Hitchens's fundamental argument is that the New Testament is a late, garbled, and often fictional collection of documents that therefore cannot be accepted as inspired or revealed. Time and again throughout his discussion, though, Hitchens demonstrates a feeble or erroneous understanding of the New Testament, which fundamentally undermines his case.

Historicity and Reliability of the Gospels

To begin with, like the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament is, for Hitchens, merely a "crude" forgery that was "hammered together *long* after its purported events." The notion that the Gospels could be based on eyewitness accounts is "a patently fraudulent claim." It is an

error to assume "that the four Gospels were in any sense a historical record"; they were instead "a garbled and oral-based reconstruction undertaken some *considerable time* after the fact" (pp. 110–12).[40] There are two essential claims made here: first, that the Gospels are "garbled and oral-based" and therefore unreliable, and second, that they were only written down "long after" the purported events they describe and are therefore unreliable. Since the Gospels are late, non-eyewitness accounts, the reasoning goes, whatever they have to say can be safely dismissed, both as history and theology, let alone as inspired revelation.

Without providing any background or context, Hitchens is taking sides in a scholarly debate that has been going on for over two centuries in an attempt to discover the "historical Jesus" and understand how the Gospels came to be written. In this debate, positions range on a vast spectrum from belief that the New Testament is completely inerrant to the belief that it is completely fictional, with numerous positions between these two poles. It should be emphasized that this debate is ongoing. No universal consensus has emerged; the debate has not been resolved in Hitchens's favor as he implies throughout his presentation. It is a very complicated intellectual field, one that Hitchens reductionistically attempts to present as a *fait accompli* supporting his atheistic prejudices.[41]

It is probably not coincidental that Hitchens provides no scholarly sources for his claim that the Gospels as we have them were based on "oral" accounts, since the consensus of even *secular* biblical scholars is precisely the opposite of Hitchens's assertion. "It is almost universally agreed today," the authoritative *Anchor Bible Dictionary* tells us, "that the 'oral' theory is insufficient to explain the agreements between the Synoptic Gospels."[42] Rather, although it is only a theory, the majority

40. Emphasis added to quotations in this paragraph.

41. For background, see *ABD*, 1:725–36; Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past & Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Donald K. McKim, ed., *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

42. *ABD*, 6:263b.

consensus view holds that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke used at least two *written* sources: Mark and Q (an abbreviation of the German *Quelle*, for a lost "source," which is thought to be a written source for passages found in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark). In addition, there is unique material found only in either Matthew or Luke but not in both.[43] Though there was an ongoing oral tradition of Jesus's life and teachings, it was paralleled by a very early written tradition. As we shall see in the case of Paul, at least parts of this tradition was *written* down within less than two decades of the death of Jesus at the very latest.

Hitchens is aware of the hypothetical source Q, but in a hopelessly garbled fashion: "The book on which all four [Gospels] may possibly have been based [is] known speculatively to scholars as 'Q'" (p. 112). Note first, that Hitchens is aware that Q is a *written* source, a "book," which, in and of itself, directly contradicts Hitchens's claim that the Gospels are late "garbled and oral-based reconstruction[s]" (p. 112). He simply can't have it both ways. But Hitchens is further mistaken. He claims all four Gospels were based on Q; in reality only two are thought to have used Q: Matthew and Luke. John has nothing to do with Q, and Q is defined precisely as the material common to Matthew and Luke but *not found in Mark*! Thus we discover that Hitchens definitively rejects the historicity of the New Testament based on utterly confused misconceptions of the claims of contemporary New Testament scholars and the issues at hand. Perhaps he should reconsider.

The second flank of Hitchens's two-pronged attack on the historicity of the New Testament is that the Gospels were written "long after" (p. 110) or a "considerable time after" (p. 112) the events they describe. The implied point here is that their late date means they could not have been written by eyewitnesses (p. 111). Of course, the Gospels of Mark and Luke do not purport to have been written by eyewitnesses, so in some ways the point is moot. Hitchens is critiquing two of the Gospels for not being something they never claimed to be. (This, by the way, is an excellent argument against the alleged

43. On the two-source theory, see *ABD*, 6:165–71, 679–82; on Q see *ABD*, 5:567–72.

fabrication of the Gospels; if people were just making up stories about Jesus, why not attribute them to famous apostles like Peter rather than to non-apostles like Mark or Luke?) But this provides us no reason to think that the information they contain is inherently unreliable. As Richard Bauckham has shown, there is good reason to believe that the Gospels are based on the accounts of eyewitnesses, even if collected in some cases by disciples of the eyewitnesses.[44] In rejecting the Gospels because of the method of their composition, Hitchens fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the transmission of oral tradition in the first century, showing himself to be hopelessly blinded by the assumptions of the twenty-first. Indeed, for students to publish the teachings of their masters was often the norm in the ancient world. In this the New Testament is no different than Plato or Xenophon writing their recollections of the teaching of Socrates.[45] The *Enneads* of Plotinus were actually edited by his disciple Porphyry.[46] The teachings of Confucius and the Buddha were both recorded by their disciples. If we were to consistently apply Hitchens's method to ancient texts, the majority would have to be dismissed out of hand. But historians don't do that in the cases of Socrates or Plotinus or Confucius. So why should we uniquely apply this untenable methodology to the teachings of Jesus?

Early Christian Literacy

Hitchens is also mistaken in his claim that all of Jesus's disciples were "illiterate" (p. 114). Presumably he is basing this claim—for which he typically provides *no* documentation—on Acts 4:13, in which Peter and John (not all the apostles) are described as *agrammatoi*, literally "unlettered." This is generally understood by modern scholars, however, not to mean that they were necessarily illiterate, but that they

44. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

45. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Xenophon, *Conversations of Socrates*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1990).

46. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991).

were untrained in the learning of the Jewish scholars of the day.[47] That is, the Jewish scholars were astonished at the theological sophistication of these men who had not been trained in their schools. There is, contra Hitchens, good evidence for literacy among early Christians. Jesus is depicted as literate since he reads scripture in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 14:16) and writes (John 8:6–8). Paul, the author of numerous letters, was obviously literate. Matthew, as a tax collector, almost certainly could not have performed his job were he not literate (Matthew 9:9). The apostles are also depicted as sending a letter in Acts 15:23. At least some of the disciples could apparently read the sign placed above Christ at the crucifixion (John 19:19). Since there is no reason to think that any of these incidental references to literacy would have been invented for some later insidious theological purpose, we must conclude that Hitchens is again wrong in his claim.[48] And this observation is not just trivial pedantry. Hitchens needs the disciples of Jesus to be illiterate to further distance them from the written Gospels so that he can dismiss the historicity of the Gospels. Hitchens again errs on the side of his ideology.

But let's grant, for the sake of argument, that *all* of Jesus's immediate disciples were illiterate, as Hitchens claims. So what? Does that somehow disqualify their testimony? Are illiterate people inherently less intelligent than the literate? Are illiterate people incapable of seeing events and accurately recounting them? (If I were so inclined I might envisage a new category of politically incorrect prejudice, the "readist.") Hitchens betrays a compulsion to emphasize the alleged illiteracy of religious believers, presumably as a form of denigrating their intelligence (pp. 60, 68, 98, 114–15, 124). But Hitchens fails to note that this accusation would apply with equal frequency to atheists in the era before printing. In modern Western societies with universal, free compulsory education, there is perhaps a stigma attached to

47. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 152–53.

48. On literacy and orality in the ancient world in general, see Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Nicholas G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 868–69, 1072 (hereafter *OCD*).

illiteracy; in societies before the invention of printing, however, illiteracy was the norm, not the exception. It is rather like critiquing ancient people for not being able to drive a car or use a computer.

It is important to emphasize that, especially in times before printing, illiterate people were not necessarily ignorant or stupid. Indeed, Plato believed that writing weakened memory and true understanding since students no longer had to truly learn (that is, memorize), relying instead on texts they had browsed but did not truly understand—a critique Plato would have justifiably directed against Hitchens.[49] The point here is that, regardless of whether Plato is right or wrong about the relationship of memory, reading, and understanding, it is nonetheless quite clear that illiterate people have historically been able to memorize lengthy texts and transmit them with high degrees of overall accuracy, and that oral cultures—that is, cultures with limited literacy and, more importantly, limited numbers of expensive handwritten books—have managed to preserve huge bodies of oral tradition relatively accurately. Indeed, in many ancient societies, writing was viewed as a stopgap measure to assist young scholars in memorizing, or "writing on the tablet of their heart."[50] This can be seen, for example, in the Jewish Mishnah and Talmud, huge collections of traditions written down only after centuries of oral transmission.[51] Homer's epics and many other works of oral poetry were preserved by bards for centuries. Even today, many Muslims memorize the entire Qurʾan, believing that only by memorizing a text can one truly come to internalize and understand it.

Besides being a rather transparent attempt to depict the followers of Jesus as uneducated and gullible fools, Hitchens's ultimate point is,

49. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c–275e.

50. Proverbs 7:3; Jeremiah 17:1; 2 Corinthians 3:3; see David McLain Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

51. Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is based on an incident in ancient China in which the Confucian scholars memorized all their texts when it became a crime to own a Confucian book under the tyrannical reign of Qin Shi in 213 BC; when the tyrant died, the books were restored from memory, though not without disputed readings.

apparently, that because the disciples were (supposedly) illiterate they could not have written the texts attributed to them; the Gospels therefore must be late and secondhand. This, however, is sheer nonsense, owing to the widespread ancient practice of dictating to professional scribes. Indeed, these "scribes" (Greek *grammateus*) formed a distinct social class in Judea in the first century and were often depicted as being opposed to Jesus, though some are mentioned as being among his followers (Matthew 13:52; 23:34).[52] Paul, though clearly literate, dictated most of his letters to a scribe (Romans 15:22), as demonstrated by the fact that he frequently mentions writing a particular sentence as final greeting with his own hand—meaning the rest of the letter was written by a scribe.[53] There is no reason to assume that the disciples, even if illiterate, could not have dictated written accounts of Jesus to literate professional scribes. Indeed, Christian tradition claims precisely that Mark wrote his Gospel as Peter's scribe.[54] Furthermore, even though some of the disciples were undoubtedly literate, it is quite probable that they dictated their recollections following contemporary custom, since trained scribes of the day could write faster and more clearly than the average nonspecialist literate person.[55]

Dating the New Testament

Although again he provides neither specifics nor documentation—an extraordinarily frequent and annoying characteristic of his book—Hitchens claims that the Gospels were written long after Jesus and therefore, presumably, could not be eyewitness accounts. Note that this is again an ideological issue for Hitchens. He must distance the Gospels from the life of Jesus in order to undermine their historicity.

52. *ABD*, 5:1012–16.

53. Romans 16:22; 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; see E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

54. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.14–17, citing a lost work of Papias.

55. On books and reading among the earliest Christian communities, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

The first problem is that Hitchens exaggerates the distance between the death of Jesus and the first written documents attesting his activities and teachings. In reality, the dating of the Gospels is a matter of considerable dispute, with no consensus at hand, though the overall tendency is to date the composition of Mark to the late 60s, Matthew and Luke to the 70s (and perhaps as late as the 80s), and John to the 80s or 90s.[56] Of course, none of these dates preclude apostolic authorship; assuming John was in his twenties during the ministry of Jesus (c. AD 30), he would have been in his seventies during the 80s, and thus potentially still alive to write his Gospel.

There are, on the other hand, a number of arguments in favor of earlier dating, though one would never be able to imagine that by reading Hitchens.[57] For example, it is generally agreed by New Testament scholars that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same author; in fact, these texts are frequently referred to collectively as Luke-Acts.[58] Acts ends with Paul preaching in Rome for two years as a fulfillment of God's plan to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 28), but it does not mention the death of Paul, which is thought to have occurred sometime between AD 62 and 65.[59] If Acts was written *after* the death of Paul, how could Luke have ignored such an important event and its implications, given that his audience would have been aware of the fact? Although various explanations have been suggested, the most obvious conclusion is that Acts was written *before* the death of Paul, that is, in the early 60s. Since the Gospel of Luke was clearly written before Acts (see Acts 1:1), this gives a date in the early sixties at the *latest* for the composition of the Gospel of Luke. And since it is widely agreed that Luke is dependent upon Mark, this gives a date for Mark in the late 50s at the *latest*. Consistently using standard historical methodology applied to most ancient texts, the

56. Basic information and extended bibliography can be found in the relevant articles in *ABD*, 3:912–31; 4:397–420, 541–57, 622–41.

57. See, for example, John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976).

58. *ABD*, 4:397–420.

59. 1 Clement 5:5–7; Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians 12:2, see Kirsopp Lake, *Apostolic Fathers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912).

obvious conclusion is that Mark was written within twenty-five years of the death of Jesus, and Luke within thirty.

In fact, the main reason consistently given for dating the Gospels to after AD 70 is that Jesus prophesies of the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem.[60] Since Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple—and, as atheists assure us, since there is no such thing as real prophecy—the Gospels must have been written *after* that destruction occurred, in other words, after AD 70. It follows that since the Gospels were written after AD 70, they could not have been written by eyewitnesses, leaving critics free to dismiss any portions of the documents they wish as later additions or interpolations. (Of course, all of this assumes that Jesus was not the real Messiah who could make a real prophecy.)

Now if a Gospel had said, "Jesus truly prophesied of the destruction of the Temple, and anyone can go to Jerusalem and see its ruins today," we would definitively know that the text was written after the destruction of the temple. For example, when John mentions a saying of Jesus to Peter that was "said to show by what death [Peter] was to glorify God" (John 21:19), it is reasonable to assume that John is writing to an audience that already knows about the death of Peter. That is to say, John's Gospel must have been written after the death of Peter (traditionally late in the reign of Nero, perhaps AD 64). But the Gospels present the passages on the destruction of the temple as a prophetic warning to believers, never claiming that Christ's prophecies had been fulfilled—which would have been a natural response *if the prophecy had indeed already been fulfilled when the Gospels were written*, just as John mentions the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy of the death of Peter.[61]

But let's assume for the sake of argument that in fact Jesus was an ordinary mortal who merely believed that he was a prophet. It is nonetheless quite possible that he could simply have looked at the social unrest and rebellion brewing in Judea and correctly guessed that there would eventually be a revolt against Rome that would culminate in

60. Matthew 23:37–39; 24:1–2, 15–22; Mark 13:1–2, 14–20; Luke 13:34–35; 21:5–6, 20–24.

61. Interestingly, John mentions neither the prophecy of the destruction of the temple nor its fulfillment.

Roman victory and in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.[62] Indeed, there is ample evidence that prophecies of the destruction of the temple were rather commonplace around the time of Christ.[63] Political pundits today—like Hitchens himself—do this type of thing all the time on TV, occasionally accurately predicting (or guessing?) elections, wars, future economic activity, and so on. Of course, many are wrong in their predictions, but some, perhaps only by chance, get it right. Are we to assume that those pundits who correctly guess the winner of an election must have made their guess *after* the election was over? In an ancient context, Jesus's correct prediction would have been viewed by his followers as a true prophecy. When Jerusalem was indeed destroyed, its destruction would have been seen by Christians as proof that Jesus was truly the Messiah. Properly understood in its ancient context, the presence of a prophecy of the destruction of the temple is insufficient grounds for dating the Gospels to after AD 70, even if one believes that Jesus was an ordinary mortal.

In all of this Hitchens is expecting more from ancient sources than it is reasonable to expect, given the tenuous nature of the survival of ancient documents. Hitchens is apparently under the delusion that there were newspapers in the ancient world that kept accurate, day-to-day accounts of all the latest events and that all such records have survived to the present in well-kept archives. In reality, neither is true. By the standard of ancient historiography, the Gospels, even if written after AD 70, are still remarkably close to the events they describe. For example, the *earliest* surviving biography of Alexander the Great, written by Diodorus, dates to nearly three centuries after Alexander's death.[64] Livy's account of the campaigns of Hannibal was written over

62. Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1984), provides details of the unrest leading up to the Jewish rebellion against Rome.

63. Y. Eliav, "Prediction of the Destruction of the Herodian Temple in the Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Scrolls, and Related Texts," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 10 (1992): 89–147; see also C. Evans, "Opposition to the Temple: Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 235–53.

64. Nicholas G. L. Hammond, *Three Historians of Alexander the Great* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); A. B. Bosworth, *From Arrian to Alexander: Studies in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

a century and a half after the death of the Carthaginian general in 182 BC.[65] Tactitus wrote his *Annals* around AD 115; his book covers imperial Roman history from AD 14 to 68, meaning he wrote some fifty to a hundred years after the events he describes.[66] Suetonius likewise wrote his history of the Caesars in the early second century; his biography of Julius Caesar was thus written over a century and a half after the event.[67] Herodotus's non-eyewitness account of the Persian Wars was likewise written up to half a century after the events he describes.[68] Our major surviving source for the lives and teachings of most ancient philosophers is Diogenes Laertius, who wrote centuries after many of the men whose lives he records; Plutarch's famous biographies are likewise often centuries after the fact.[69] Hitchens betrays a fundamental naïveté about the nature of ancient history when he demands more from early Christian records than can reasonably be expected from any other ancient source.

Thus, when compared to other ancient texts, the proximity of the earliest New Testament accounts to the life and teachings of Jesus is quite remarkable. Our earliest Christian source, Paul's letter to the Galatians, dates to around AD 50, less than twenty years after the death of Jesus. The *latest* New Testament source for the life of Jesus, the Gospel of John (dated variously to between AD 70 and 110, from forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus), is also well within the norms for ancient historiography noted above. There are no reasonable historical grounds for contesting the historicity of Jesus; Hitchens's agnosticism on this matter is driven purely by ideology.

Which raises another important point. In his entire argument Hitchens conspicuously ignores Paul, our earliest surviving source for the life of Jesus. As Paul never quotes directly from the Gospels, his letters were written either before the Gospels were published or, at the very least, before they were widely circulated. (Likewise, on the other hand, the Gospels never quote or allude to Paul's letters, imply-

65. Livy, *The War with Hannibal* (New York: Penguin, 1972); *OCD*, 665–66, 877–79.
66. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (New York: Penguin, 1989); *OCD*, 1469–70.
67. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (New York: Penguin, 1989); *OCD*, 1451–52.
68. Herodotus, *OCD*, 696–98.
69. Diogenes, *OCD*, 474–75; Plutarch, *OCD*, 1200–1201.

ing that they were written before Paul's letters became widely read.) Paul's letters are generally believed to have been written in the "early and mid-50s,"[70] within twenty to twenty-five years of the ministry of Jesus. Paul clearly lived within the lifetimes of the apostles and met personally with many of them.[71] Unlike Hitchens, New Testament scholars consistently use Paul as an important source for understanding the life and teachings of Jesus.[72] From Paul we learn that Jesus was of Davidic descent (Romans 1:3), that his mission was only to Israel (Romans 15:8), that there was a last supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), and that Jesus was executed by crucifixion (15:3), along with various teachings such as the importance of loving one's neighbors (Romans 12:14–20).[73]

Most notably, whatever one wishes to make of the claim, Paul makes it abundantly clear that, within less than two decades of Jesus's death, the earliest Christians believed that Jesus had been resurrected.[74] Not only that, but Paul explicitly states that he received his information about the resurrection directly from eyewitnesses Peter (Cephas) and the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). In other words, within twenty years of the death of Christ we have explicit written testimony that the eyewitness apostles were claiming that Jesus was resurrected. The essence of the resurrection narratives is clearly not a late theological invention but the very heart of earliest Christianity.[75] Hitchens's rejection of the New Testament accounts of Jesus as late

70. *ABD*, 5:192a; the seven generally accepted Pauline letters are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

71. Paul's meeting with the apostles is described in Galatians 2 and Acts 15.

72. For example, see Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 79–154.

73. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 1:45–48, summarizes the major data about Jesus's life and teaching that can be gleaned from Paul.

74. For example, 1 Corinthians 15. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 126–33, summarizes all the evidence.

75. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). For an interesting debate on the subject, see Robert B. Stewart, John Dominic Crossan, and N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

fabrications cannot be sustained using standard historiographical methodology for ancient history.

Did Jesus Even Exist?

Hitchens's hyper-skeptical approach to the New Testament means he is frequently unable to mention Jesus without inserting, with a knowing wink, the caveat that his "existence" is "highly questionable" (p. 114; compare pp. 60, 118, 119, 127). Even if Jesus did exist, Hitchens assures us that he was simply one of "many deranged prophets roaming Palestine at the time" (p. 118). Such an evaluation of Jesus's mental state may not be quite as harsh as it initially seems when we remember that, for Hitchens, all religious believers are in some way deranged. While it may be an arguable position to reject the miraculous claims associated with Jesus, historiographically speaking, it is sheer folly and methodological suicide to claim, as Hitchens repeatedly hints, that Jesus didn't even exist. Given the paucity of ancient sources, it is usually assumed that if a person is mentioned once by a single historical source, that person actually existed. Paul's authentic letters—mainly written in the 50s, within twenty-five years of the death of Christ—mention Jesus frequently. Using normal standards of historiography for ancient history, Paul's letters *alone* are sufficient to demonstrate that Jesus existed.

But in fact, by the standards of ancient history, the existence of Jesus is unusually well documented. In addition to several independent sources in the New Testament, we have non-Christian sources as well. The Roman historian Suetonius mentions that during the reign of Claudius (AD 41–54) there were "disturbances [among the Jews in Rome] at the instigation of Chrestus"—the fact that Suetonius misspells the obviously unfamiliar word indicates this cannot be a Christian interpolation.[76] Likewise, the pagan historian Tacitus tells us that during the reign of Nero (AD 54–68) there was talk in Rome of "Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius, had been executed by the

76. Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25.4; see Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), for reviews of all early nonbiblical references to Jesus.

procurator Pontius Pilate."[77] The Jewish historian Josephus famously mentions Jesus, James the brother of Jesus, and John the Baptist in his history of the Jews in the first century AD.[78] Although many, or even most, things about Jesus are debated, among serious scholars of the New Testament there is *absolutely no doubt* that Jesus existed. When Hitchens casts doubt on not only the divinity and miracles but also the very existence of Jesus, he is allying himself not with mainstream scholarship, as he claims, but with fringe cranks—and he does so for essentially ideological reasons. He is mistaken if he believes that such claims bolster the case for atheism among informed scholars.

Since Hitchens doubts the very existence of Jesus, it would seem superfluous to debate the virgin birth. But he can't resist—ignoring the truism that all fictional characters technically must have virgin births. Here Hitchens makes a foray into biblical linguistics with rather unsatisfactory results. Hitchens tells us, "We know that the [Hebrew] word translated as 'virgin,' namely *almah*, means only a young woman" (p. 115). Actually, more precisely, it means "a marriageable girl" or "a girl who is able to be married."[79] Even more specifically, it refers to a girl who has reached puberty and is thus "marriageable." Although it is true that the term *almah* does not *require* the referent to be a virgin (*betulah*), it is important to emphasize that, in an ancient Near Eastern cultural context, a young unmarried teenager, or *almah*, would have been *assumed* to be a virgin. This is made clear by the Septuagint—the second-century-BC Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. The Septuagint translates the Hebrew *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 with the Greek term *parthenos*, or "virgin," demonstrating that this was the standard conceptualization of the meaning of the term in

77. Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.

78. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.3.3; 20.199; 18.5.2. On the problem of Christian interpolations in Josephus, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 56–88; Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 163–75; and Shlomo Pines, *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and Its Implications* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1971). It should perhaps be noted that no one can accuse Professor Pines, a Jew, of theological bias in this matter.

79. Ludwig Koehler, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Brill, 2001), 1:836; G. Johannes Botterweck et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 11:154–63.

ancient times. The Septuagint, it should be remembered, did not use the term *parthenos* to create some type of Christian apologetic, since it was translated some two centuries *before* the earliest Christian documents were written. Rather, Christians writing the New Testament quoted the Septuagint translation because they were writing in Greek and therefore used the standard Greek translation of scripture of the day.[80] Thus when Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14—"a virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive"—he is not mistranslating the Hebrew to invent a new Christian doctrine as Hitchens claims; rather, he is quoting the *standard* Jewish Greek translation of his day.

Hitchens also notes that a number of other religions have tales of divine or miraculous births of their religious heroes (p. 23). Quite true. However, of the figures Hitchens mentions, only one, Genghis Khan, is, like Jesus, historically attested by contemporary literature; the rest, unlike Jesus, are legendary.[81] And, as is becoming increasingly expected, Hitchens gets the story of Genghis Khan's birth wrong.[82] The only near-contemporary source for the life of Genghis Khan, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, does not mention anything miraculous associated with his birth.[83] Since Hitchens provides no source for his claim, we are unable to verify its accuracy. But if such a story exists, it is probably a late development, perhaps influenced by Buddhism or even by the Christian story of the virgin birth of Jesus, since the Kereyid tribe of the Mongol confederation was Christian. The alleged virgin birth of Genghis Khan tells us nothing about Jesus, but a great deal about Mongolian society of the thirteenth century.

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80. Gerhard Kittel et al., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:826–37; and Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2000), 183–205.

81. Although the Buddha is a historical figure, stories of the miraculous birth of the Buddha date to several centuries after his death, not decades as in the case of Jesus.

82. Hitchens further muddles things. For example, although Huitzilopochtli's father was a god, his mother was not a virgin; when she became pregnant her other children wanted to kill her for shame. David Carrasco, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:22; more generally, see Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Incarnations of the Aztec Supernatural: The Image of Huitzilopochtli in Mexico* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989).

83. Francis Woodman Cleaves, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 14–15.

Be that as it may, *any* type of significant influence or plagiarism in the case of the New Testament nativity stories is quite unlikely, since it is extremely dubious that the Jewish authors of the New Testament had ever even heard of most of the figures Hitchens mentions. Whatever the reason, when the New Testament authors included the story of the virgin birth of Jesus in the New Testament—whether it is actual history, sincere belief, or pure fabrication—they were certainly not plagiarizing from the stories of Huitzilopochtli, the Buddha, Krishna, or Genghis Khan. While from the perspective of comparative religions it is interesting that many religions have tales of miraculous births of heroes, the Christian story of the virgin birth must be understood within the context of Jewish scripture and tradition, not world religion. Thus the supposed point of Hitchens's paragraph eludes us. For a serious study of the issues related to the nativity narratives, I suggest that Hitchens peruse Professor Raymond Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah*, a volume in the prestigious Anchor Bible Reference Library.[84] The difference between Brown's careful and scholarly exegesis and Hitchens's haphazard flippancy is most striking.

Of course, Hitchens's real point is not linguistic but biological: "parthenogenesis," he asserts, "is not possible for human mammals" (p. 115). Really? I was under the apparently false impression that Hitchens was a believer in the efficacies of science. Has he not heard of *in vitro* fertilization, for example? In fact, women now can bear children that come from the fertilized eggs of other women and the sperm of complete strangers whom they have never met, let alone had sex with. In other words, with contemporary science alone, it is perfectly plausible that a woman who has never had sexual intercourse—a virgin, in other words—can conceive and bear a child. Imagine what new advances in human fertility science will occur in the next thousand or ten thousand or even million years. Contemporary scientists could have caused Mary to become pregnant without having sexual intercourse with any male. Yet Hitchens has trouble believing that God could have done it?

84. Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

Hitchens's overall disdain for the life of Jesus is reflected in the fact that he can't be bothered to even get basic biblical chronology straight. "Even the stoutest defenders of the Bible story," he assures us, "now admit that if Jesus was ever born it wasn't until at least AD 4" (pp. 59–60). They do? He has obviously been reading different "stout defenders" of the Bible story than I have. The Gospel narratives agree that Jesus was born during the lifetime of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5), who died in 4 BC.[85] Luke says that Jesus was "about thirty years old" in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (AD 27–28), making an AD 4 date impossible (Luke 3:1, 23) since Jesus would then have been about twenty-four years old in AD 28.[86] A minority of scholars have proposed an AD 6 date, associating the census mentioned in Luke with the rule of Quirinius over Syria (Luke 2:2).[87] But no one I know of argues for the birth of Jesus in AD 4. Ironically, Hitchens stands alone with his "stoutest defenders of the Bible story" in arguing for the birth of Jesus in AD 4.[88] The Jesus whom Hitchens doesn't believe in is apparently a different Jesus than the one of whom the rest of us have heard.

The Search for Historicity

Bizarrely, Hitchens seems simultaneously enthralled by both fundamentalist inerrancy and the Jesus Seminar. For Hitchens, if the Bible is not inerrant, it cannot be inspired in any way. "The one interpretation that we simply have to discard is the one that claims divine warrant for all four of [the Gospels]" (p. 112). For Hitchens all differences between Gospel accounts are inconsistencies, and any inconsistency disproves not only inspiration but even historicity. On the other hand, as any trial lawyer can tell you, inconsistencies between

85. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:375–6; Hitchens is aware of this (p. 112).

86. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 546–55, reviews the data.

87. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:212–13.

88. It is possible that Hitchens simply made a typographical error using *AD* instead of *BC*; however, his overall point seems to be that the millennium had not yet occurred in the year it was celebrated (pp. 59–60). Hitchens writes that Christ wasn't born "until at least AD 4" (p. 60), a phrase that wouldn't make sense if he were thinking of 4 BC.

eyewitness accounts are to be expected, given the vagaries of perception and memory.

Ironically, Hitchens seems more impressed with the accuracy of the apocryphal and Gnostic Gospels. He claims, for example, that the "scrolls [from Nag Hammadi] were of the same period and provenance as many of the subsequently canonical and 'authorized' Gospels" (p. 112). We don't want to appear too pedantic, but the Nag Hammadi texts are codices (bound books written on both sides of the page), not scrolls.[89] But, beyond that rather sophomoric error, Hitchens is simply dead wrong about the dating of the Nag Hammadi texts. All the Nag Hammadi texts are in Coptic (Egyptian written in a modified Greek alphabet), a written language that did not even exist in the first century AD when the Gospels were written. The surviving Coptic manuscripts of the Nag Hammadi collection date to the mid-fourth century AD. While the Nag Hammadi books are generally thought to be later copies and translations of earlier books, "the precise dates of the composition of these texts are uncertain, but most are from the second and third centuries CE. All were originally written in Greek and translated into Coptic."[90] In other words, the *earliest* of the Nag Hammadi texts date to nearly a century after Jesus and thus were clearly written after the *latest* books of the New Testament texts. Most Nag Hammadi texts date to between one and a half and two centuries after Jesus. The very earliest of the Nag Hammadi texts may overlap with the very latest of the New Testament texts, but, as a whole, the Nag Hammadi books are a century or two *younger* than the New Testament. Once again, Hitchens simply has it wrong. Most scholars (though not all) would agree with Professor Meier's conclusion. After surveying all known early material about Jesus, he concluded: "The four canonical Gospels turn out to be the only large documents containing significant blocks of material relevant to the quest for the historical Jesus."[91] The one exception may be

89. This distinction is an important one, with serious implications for the nature of early Christian communities and their use of books and scripture; see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 43–94.

90. Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), xi.

91. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 139; he surveys the evidence from pages 41 to 166.

the Gospel of Thomas, which some scholars date to the first century, *perhaps* as early as the writing of the canonical Gospels. However, this early date is hotly disputed, with many scholars dating it to the mid-second century, and dependent upon the canonical Gospels. No consensus on the dating of this document seems at hand.[92]

While Hitchens is remarkably credulous when it comes to the noncanonical Gospels, he is conversely hyper-skeptical when it comes to the historicity of the Gospels. (Methodologically speaking, it is necessary to maintain a single consistent approach to all ancient texts, religious or nonreligious, canonical or noncanonical.) The reason for this is plain. Hitchens believes that a late date for the Gospels and an early date for the Nag Hamnmadi texts both undermine arguments for the historicity of the Gospels. Whereas Hitchens stands nearly alone in his belief that the Nag Hammadi Gospels are "fractionally more credible" than the canonical Gospels (p. 113), he is far more dubious about canonical texts. For example, he notes, following Bart (not Barton!) Ehrman,[93] that the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3–11) was "scribbled into the canon long after the fact" (pp. 120–21). Hitchens has it half right. It is true that this passage is not found in the earliest surviving manuscripts of John.[94] Unfortunately, but probably not coincidentally, for Hitchens the story stops there. It shouldn't. Hitchens's only cited source on this matter, Bart Ehrman, goes on to note: "Most scholars think that it was probably a well-known story circulating in the oral tradition about Jesus."[95] Why didn't Hitchens tell his readers about this? It is a mere sentence away from the passage from Ehrman that Hitchens does quote (p. 122).

92. *ABD*, 6:535–40.

93. Hitchens's general sloppiness is betrayed by the fact that he consistently misspells the name as "Barton Ehrman" (pp. 120, 142, 298), http://bartdehrman.com (accessed 2 July 2009). Hitchens gets the name right, however, on p. 290.

94. Hitchens is referencing Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 63–65; see Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 219–22, where Metzger reviews the specific manuscript evidence; see also Raymond Edward Brown, trans. and ed., *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1:335–36.

95. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 65.

Of course, Ehrman's real point undermines Hitchens's claim; but Hitchens does not distinguish between textual criticism (deciding which readings are original in a given manuscript) and historicity (deciding which events really took place). It is perfectly possible that the most ancient manuscripts of the Gospels contain nonhistorical stories or teachings attributed to Jesus and that later oral traditions contain authentic recollections of Jesus. Thus the story of Jesus and the adulteress could be an authentic tale of Jesus that happens to have been added late to the Gospel of John. Professor Raymond Brown, for example, maintains that "a good case can be argued that the story . . . is truly ancient."[96] Indeed, the story seems to have been known to Papias, writing around AD 130, who attributes it to the now lost *Gospel of the Hebrews*.[97] Professor Bruce Metzger, one of the leading authorities on the textual history of the New Testament, agrees that "the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity."[98] So it is quite possibly an authentic ancient tale of Jesus, consistent with his other teachings on forgiveness, that was transmitted orally for a while and then eventually added to the Gospel of John.

But what if this incident is an entirely fictitious tale? Is that sufficient grounds to reject the historicity of *everything* about Jesus found in John, and—as Hitchens would have us do—even to doubt Jesus's very existence? Hitchens seems to think so. Immediately after his discussion of this passage from John, he concludes that "the case for biblical consistency or authenticity or 'inspiration' has been in tatters for some time . . . and thus no 'revelation' can be derived from that quarter" (p. 122). In reality, even if the story of the woman taken in adultery were fiction, almost everything else in the book of John *is* attested in the earliest manuscripts of that book.[99] The crucial thing to note is that the presence of a few interpolations or inauthentic stories does

96. Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 1:335.

97. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.17, quoting a lost work of Papias; see Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1990), 2:866; on the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, see *ABD*, 3:105–6.

98. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 220.

99. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

not undermine the authenticity of the entire document. Garbled or even fabricated stories are told about everyone, undoubtedly including Mr. Hitchens himself. Should we doubt the existence of Mr. Hitchens because undoubtedly apocryphal tales have been told about him and are even believed by many? Biblical scholars have long known that it is necessary to carefully evaluate individual texts and stories rather than to accept them all as inerrant or reject them all as completely bogus. This Manichaean all-or-nothing approach to religious texts is the *least* fruitful approach Hitchens could have taken; unfortunately it is the one he chose.

Various Annoying Tidbits

This section will review a number of unsubstantiated and sometimes even preposterous claims made by Hitchens in his forays into biblical studies. Although they seldom actually rise to the level of a coherent argument, they nonetheless merit some attention as exemplars of the tendentious sophistry he employs in his attacks on religion.

Hitchens has a rather strange understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus's "illiterate living disciples left us no record and in any event could not have been 'Christians,' since they were never to read these later books in which Christians must affirm belief" (p. 114). To claim as Hitchens does here that the immediate disciples of Christ cannot be Christians is, quite frankly, laughable. The New Testament itself tells us that in the early 40s "in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians."[100] It is thus obvious that the use of the term *Christian* antedated the writing of the New Testament, since the New Testament itself uses the term. At any rate, this is not a serious argument but a rather juvenile name game meant to annoy evangelical Christians.

In the same passage Hitchens further asserts that the earliest disciples "had no idea that anyone would ever found a church on their master's announcements" (p. 114). In fact, the Greek word for "church," *ekklesia* (better translated "assembly"), occurs numerous times in the New Testament as well as the Septuagint. Christ himself

100. Acts 11:26; see Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16.

famously spoke of founding a "church" (Matthew 16:18). Thus on the face of it Hitchens's claim is manifestly untrue. The earliest Christian communities are regularly described as churches (e.g., Acts 5:11; 8:1). In our earliest Christian documents, the letters of Paul, Christ is said to be the "head of the church" (Ephesians 5:23) that, according to Hitchens, none of the earliest Christians believed Christ would found. When Paul wrote to Christians in Thessalonica, he addressed them as "the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Only by ignoring *all* the earliest evidence we have can Hitchens make such a preposterous claim.

He notes in passing, and without even a whiff of a reference, that "no 'stable' is ever mentioned" in the Bethlehem nativity narratives (p. 114). The King James Version, which Hitchens said he used (p. 98), mentions a "manger," not a "stable" (Luke 2:7, 12), so it's not clear what the issue is here—that there are popular misconceptions about what the Bible says? This is hardly disputable, as Hitchens's own misconceptions amply demonstrate. But in reality the Greek term used by Luke, *fatne*, means, precisely, "manger," "stall," or "stable."[101] Hitchens simply gets it wrong.

Hitchens claims that "in a short passage of only one Gospel . . . the rabbis . . . *call* for the guilt in the blood of Jesus to descend upon all their subsequent generations" (p. 116). While it is true that only Matthew recounts the mob shouting, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25), all the Gospels agree that anti-Jesus factions among the Jews plotted and facilitated his arrest.[102] There is no real reason to doubt the historicity of this broader claim since Jesus was clearly arrested and executed and nearly everyone who was *pro or anti-Jesus* at this period was a Jew. It is no more remarkable than the equally obvious fact that the Greeks killed Socrates or that the British executed Nathan Hale. Is Hitchens trying to say that there weren't Jewish factions opposed to Jesus, just as most of Jesus's followers were

101. William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 862a.

102. Matthew 26:57–68; 27:1–2, 15–23; Mark 14:53–65; 15:1, 6–14; Luke 22:54–71; 23:17–23; John 19:4–15.

also Jews? Furthermore, it can also hardly be an objection that one Gospel contains unique material not found in the others. In the first place, this is true of all ancient historical records. (If we needed multiple attestations before accepting the historicity of an event or person, most of ancient history would have to be rejected out of hand.) It is patently obvious that the brief descriptions in the Gospels of the trial and execution of Jesus—an event that went on for hours—can't contain complete transcripts of everything that occurred, as the Gospel writers themselves recognized (John 21:25). But even so, Hitchens again gets the details wrong. It was not the rabbis but the populace as a whole who were interacting with Pilate in a type of ancient *acclamatio*, a loud public clamor for or against a policy, person, or event. This was a type of populist voting decided by whichever faction could shout the loudest. Nor does the text claim that the bloodguilt would "descend upon all their subsequent generations" (p. 116), as Hitchens asserts. Rather, it says "on our children," technically meaning only one generation. In the biblical context, this undoubtedly harks back to the idea that the "iniquity of parents" rests upon their children, but only to the "third and the fourth generation of those that reject me" (Exodus 20:6). But all of this is rather moot since Christ himself asked the Father to forgive his persecutors, and thus, for Christians, rendering whatever guilt might have theoretically existed null and void (Luke 23:34). That some later Christian denominations—not all—invented a nonbiblical doctrine that all Jews, everywhere and at all times, were equally guilty of deicide (the "killing of God") doesn't really tell us anything about the New Testament *per se*, though it tells us a great deal about anti-Semitism among later Christians. It is rather absurd for Hitchens to blame later misinterpretations of the Bible on the original authors. Certainly I don't blame the authors of the Gospels for the way Hitchens misunderstands them!

Hitchens is similarly confused about the formation of the New Testament canon. He assures us that "early church councils . . . decided which Gospels were 'synoptic' and which were 'apocryphal'" (p. 117). That the invention of this false dichotomy between synoptic and apocryphal is not merely a passing blunder on Hitchens's part is shown

by the fact that he elsewhere again uses the two terms as if they were antonyms (p. 118). Let us render some assistance; the word he likely wants is *canonical*, not *synoptic*. Aside from the fact that the term *synoptic* was invented in 1776 in Johann Jakob Griesbach's *Synopsis*,[103] and thus had nothing to do with the church councils, *synoptic* does not mean "orthodox" or "accepted by the church," as Hitchens uses it. *Synoptic* (from Greek "with the same view or perspective") is a technical term used to describe the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the fact that they share many parallels in both wording and order of presentation. John, with a great deal of unique material, is *not* a synoptic Gospel, though it is *canonical*. In the New Testament context, *Apocrypha* is another modern category defining texts that contain stories about New Testament figures but that are not part of the canon and are generally thought to be later compositions.[104]

In point of fact, early Christians, rightly or wrongly, accepted many apocryphal texts as authentic history, though not as *canonical* scripture. For example, the traditional names and number of the "three" wise men are found only in the apocryphal texts, not in the New Testament itself.[105] Apocryphal texts were thus not rejected as useless and pernicious; rather, the initial distinction was between those texts that could be read in church as part of liturgical services (the canon) and those that could not (now called the Apocrypha). Indeed, apocryphal texts have survived to the present largely because they were transmitted by Christians who wanted to read them.

Hitchens's understanding of the formation of the canon of the New Testament is equally confused; it was not established by an authoritarian decree of the church councils, but by a long and complex process covering several centuries.[106] The finalization of

103. McKim, *Major Biblical Interpreters*, 321.

104. *ABD*, 1:294–7. These texts are readily available in English translation: James K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); the Nag Hammadi texts, some of which could be classified as apocryphal, can be found in Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.

105. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 198–200.

106. On the history of the canonization of the New Testament, see Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson,

the canon list by church councils was the *end* of the process, not the beginning. "By the close of the second century," a century and a half before the first councils, "lists begin to be drawn up of books that had come to be regarded as authoritative Christian Scriptures," such as the Muratorian Canon.[107] Irenaeus of Lyon, for example, writing in the late second century, famously insisted that there were only four authentic Gospels, the same ones we have in our canon today.[108] The first canonical list of the New Testament giving precisely the books in our current Bible comes from Athanasius in AD 367, while "the first council that accepted the present canon of the books of the New Testament was the Synod of Hippo Regius in North Africa (AD 393)."[109] Hitchens understands neither the substance nor the process of the canonization of the New Testament, nor does he grasp its significance.

Conclusion

Given the numerous problems with Hitchens's discussion of the Bible, we will perhaps be forgiven for seeing a bit of self-deception in his claim that his presentation is "fair and open-minded" (p. 115). It is quite clear that Hitchens's understanding of biblical studies is flawed at best. He consistently misrepresents what the Bible has to say, fails to contextualize biblical narratives in their original historical settings, implies unanimity among biblical scholars on quite controversial positions, and fails to provide any evidence for alternative scholarly positions, or even to acknowledge that such positions exist at all. In

2002); and David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

107. Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 191, more generally 191–201.

108. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8; see Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 153–56.

109. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 210–12, 314. Metzger (pp. 305–15) provides a helpful appendix giving the major canon lists through the fourth century; only two of twelve derive from synods. Not wishing to be overly pedantic, I note the distinction between synods (local or regional assemblies) and ecumenical councils of the entire church. The earliest canon lists created by assemblies were made by synods, not councils: Frank L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 422.

reality, biblical studies is a complicated field, with a wide range of subtle nuances and different interpretations; for Hitchens, it is sufficient to dismiss the most extreme, literalistic, and inerrantist *interpretations* of the Bible to demonstrate not only that the Bible *itself* is thoroughly flawed, false, and poisonous but that God does not exist. Hitchens's understanding of the Bible is at the level of a confused undergraduate. His musings on such matters should not be taken seriously, and should certainly not be seen as reasonable grounds for rejecting belief in God.