

Dawkins and Badiou: Two atheist approaches to the Bible

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Abstract

This essay begins by contrasting the contributions of two leading atheists. Richard Dawkins dismisses the Bible as a disordered and chaotic anthology. Alain Badiou, in contrast, engages it (specifically the writings of Paul) as material that creatively maintains fidelity to revolutionary events. Badiou's insight is taken here as a prompt to explore the diverse biblical witnesses to creation, which, as in the case of the resurrection, resists conceptual control. The Jewish and Christian traditions of creation theology can thereby offer an opportunity to explore, in the company of atheists, the ambiguities of the biblical canons and the capillaries of their socially formative effects.

Keywords

atheism, Badiou, creation theology, Dawkins

Richard Dawkins's complaints about Israel's God belong to a long tradition of moral critique; in some respects, he presents nothing new. The charge, for example, that Deuteronomy might be 'genocidal' has been repeatedly subjected to rigorous scrutiny, and the relevant Deuteronomic texts have been located within the complex history of ethical debates in Jewish and Christian traditions.¹ It is not just that the new atheists often appear to be 'hair-raisingly ignorant of generations of modern biblical scholarship'.² In addition, they seem to be allergic to the historical complexity of theological argument, although perhaps some of the underlying causes for these allergies are understandable. Whatever the causes might be, my purpose here will be to meditate on a contrast between Dawkins's pronouncements on the Bible and an alternative, more charitable approach adopted by one of the leading atheist philosophers of our time, Alain Badiou. I will argue that Badiou has provided a fresh account of the character of truth, which might in turn inform an understanding of faith in dialogues with an atheist audience.

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Richard Dawkins presents one of his major objections as a concern about the disordered unfolding of biblical tradition:

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect from a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other.³

While fundamentalists might take offence at this conclusion, most biblical scholars would not be particularly troubled by it, even if some might resist the suggestion that the biblical literature is 'chaotic'. The contemplation of hundreds of anonymous editors is indeed the everyday business of biblical scholarship, and, rather than being alarmed by this state of affairs, theologically minded scholars have often regarded the inter-generational editing of biblical texts to be an essential aspect of their status as Scripture. A possible question arising here, however, is how the various voices of Scripture relate to what might be termed founding 'events' in religious history.

One of the most prolific Jewish scholars of the Torah in recent decades, Jacob Milgrom, was fond of drawing attention to a particular rabbinic tale to explain his attitude to the development of the biblical traditions. In this story from the Talmud (*b. t. Menah* 29b), Moses asks God whether he can visit Rabbi Akiva's academy, and listen in on the great teacher from the end of the first century. According to the story, Moses sits at the back of classroom, listening to Akiva expound the Torah. But Moses is perplexed by the argument, and it is only when Akiva says, 'This is an oral law from Moses at Sinai', that Moses' mind is put to rest; he is said to be reinvigorated. What Milgrom infers from this story is not just relevant to an understanding of Jewish tradition: divine revelation arises less from heavenly voices than from extended argument.

Walter Brueggemann has articulated a similar conviction in one of the most significant Christian appropriations of the Hebrew Bible in recent years, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*.⁴ In this avowedly postmodern approach, Brueggemann understands the actual events of Israel's ancient history to be largely inaccessible, yet, in spite of this limitation, Scripture can be profitably viewed as an anthology of testimony and counter-testimony, much as we would find in the transcripts of legal matters in a court of law. Under the rubric of 'counter-testimony', we find even expressions of human outrage and mourning directed initially *against God*, which are nevertheless, in a supreme irony, divinely appropriated in the scrolls of Scripture. The content of the biblical canons, then, can hardly be taken as normative one verse at a time; what we find in Scripture is inherently a conversation, or better perhaps a choir of voices, which presents the distinct possibility that some will be out of tune with the others.

Even a cursory reading of the biblical literature will reveal that it is not simply a list of propositions about past events, or a catalogue of norms written in stone. On closer inspection, even those narratives about norms written in stone are revelatory of hermeneutical innovation.⁵ The Jewish and Christian Scriptures contain

a broad range of linguistic actions, such as promising, commanding, lamenting, warning, exhorting or, more broadly, interpreting and reinterpreting. Among this variety of discursive actions, we also find assertions about the past that are almost always mixtures of empirical and non-empirical claims, sometimes supplemented with an omniscient narrator claiming knowledge of divine motivations. But even if these biblical claims about the past are to be understood as a genre of cultural memory called historiography, then biblical scholars are virtually unanimous in insisting that this is not history writing in any modern sense.

Sensitivity to subtle questions of literary genre, however, only take us part of the way into the issues at stake in understanding the role of Scripture in Christian theology. It may be one thing to conclude that the ancient practices of history writing are not aspiring to modern standards, but it is quite another thing to say that cultural memories from the ancient world can still today supply a generally valid pathway to understanding claims about God or the world. The making of the biblical canon can indeed be understood as a series of paradigm shifts in response to many different challenges in history, yet this imperative towards continual revision cannot account for the enduring role of scriptural canons in the making of Christian theology. Unlike the Whiggish account of progress in science, there is always something that pulls us back to the *gravitas* of Scripture, and this peculiar dynamic needs some explanation.

It is precisely at this juncture that Alain Badiou might help us give account of ourselves to an atheist audience. In framing his account of epistemology, Badiou has attempted to describe the character of *fidelity* to a particular class of disruptive events that, while incommensurable with any imagined precedents, have the power to reshape the life of science, politics and the arts. Whether the disruptive event in question is the Bolshevik revolution or a paradigm-shifting experiment in science, this kind of *événement* is not a novel and transient fancy; it has ‘world-making’ social powers. The resurrection of Christ can be considered as an event in this peculiar sense, according to Badiou, not because he believes in the content of Christian faith but because he is fascinated by the Pauline logic that could build a revolutionary social movement on this peculiar foundation.

Instead of succumbing, on the one hand, to a relativist fragmentation of culture and history and, on the other hand, to the seamless growth of scientific knowledge, Badiou proposes that some revolutionary events are not graspable in any conventional sense, in part because they *constitute* the social self in fidelity to the event. In Badiou’s account, these revolutionary events provoke ‘a truth process that is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation’ and are therefore not reducible to the encyclopedia of routinized sciences.⁶ While the event itself is finally unknowable and irreducible, it is the reiterated attempts to interpret the event in social practice, ‘to persevere in the disruption’, that might be characterized as a state of permanent revolution, or perhaps to translate this into the discourse of the Reformation – *semper reformanda*.

This feature of resistance to cultural norms, both in the event’s origins and its reception, leads John Barclay to suggest that Badiou has illuminated something

highly significant about the resurrection of Christ, which goes beyond all attempts to force the Christ event into pre-existing conceptual molds:

[I]t is because the event is completely unconditioned, because its eruption owes nothing to prior ethnic, historical, social or ideological causes or structures that it belongs to no sub-set of humanity . . . What this implies about the church as an always provisional, decentred, outward-looking bearer of a truth far greater and more universal than itself is an issue ripe for further discussion.⁷

Or, as Badiou puts it himself, in his characteristic pithy style, 'Paul warns the philosopher that the conditions for the universal cannot be conceptual, either in origin, or in destination'.⁸

In the remainder of this paper, I want to leave aside the exegesis of Badiou and offer instead a reflective case-study not on the 're-creation' afforded by the resurrection but on creation itself. The working hypothesis will be, on analogy with Barclay's proposal, that even Genesis 1 is shaped in a way that conveys a truth claim beyond domestication in Israel.

To cut a long story short, Genesis 1 is widely recognized in biblical scholarship as belonging to the so-called priestly tradition, which in the case of its opening chapter is departing dramatically from Israel's earlier creation traditions, as well as from the surrounding cultures of the day. Thus, for example, older Mesopotamian traditions commonly envisaged a violent struggle between the gods at the beginning of creation, perhaps including the vanquishing of the sea goddess, Tiamat. This basic idea is also preserved in a number of biblical texts, such as in Psalms 74.13–17; 89.8–11; Isaiah 51.9–10; Job 26.10–13.

Scholars have concluded that the idea of violent conflict between the gods has been deliberately rejected in the priestly theology of Genesis 1. Instead of creation being born out of capricious divine violence, the revolutionary claim is made that God creates a stable order (and, according to Job 28 and 38, a parallel creation theology, the cosmos has been given divine laws to obey).

Among the many observations that could be made about Genesis 1, I will restrict myself to just two further points. First, a presumption that the natural world was governed by a stable order was not to be found in the ancient Near East, or, as we might say these days, in ancient Western Asia. Yet this presumption of stable order is exactly the kind of faith that must underlie scientific attempts to discover natural laws. When the venerable tradition of natural theology eventually mutated into modern science, the foundations of this modern inquiry had already long been laid.⁹ The very practice of modern science exhibits a kind of fidelity to this basic biblical conviction, even if Occam's Razor has been wielded to excise the divine character from the founding 'event' of the cosmic order.

The second point, however, relates more closely to the details of Genesis 1 and its function as a founding cultural memory. In a recent study of this text, John Rogerson has suggested that the order proposed in the priestly creation narrative

reflects a specific kind of critical thinking that is actually unrelated to modern science. He points out, for example, that Genesis 1.29–30 envisages a vegetarian order of things: both humans and animals eat only plants and fruit. Even more significant, perhaps, is the claim that all human beings are made in the image of God, *contra* the common assumption that only monarchs might deserve this honour. ‘What is described in Genesis 1’, Rogerson suggests, ‘is not the world of our experience. That world comes into being only after the Flood, a world in which human beings contribute significantly to the destructiveness, oppression and alienation which are so characteristic of it.’¹⁰ If the world of Genesis 1 is compared with the world after the flood, then it is evident that the former is a *critique* of the latter. Paradoxically, then, the world of our experience is claimed to be not the world that God intended. Consequently, the priestly narrative can be read not as a legitimization of a particular social order, as ancient historiographies often are, but rather as a utopian cosmology.

Rogerson then goes considerably beyond the details of the text when he suggests one further thesis:

I would maintain that what gave the Old Testament writers the courage to compose critical accounts of the created order was their conviction of being loved and sustained by a God who had in view a better future for both them and the created order.¹¹

There is, however, an essential element of the priestly creation theology that is not captured by Rogerson’s argument here about Genesis 1, at least if we take it to imply a special relationship between Israel and God that was not shared with other nations or ethnicities. This essential element is conveyed by the choice of the divine name in Genesis 1, ‘Elohim’ rather than ‘Yhwh’. ‘Yhwh’ is the name reserved for the worship practice that was peculiar to Israel, whereas Elohim and El were names for God that could be used by other nations. What this reveals is that priestly theology in Genesis 1 presents an ‘inclusive monotheism’ within which the divine creator might be known by other nations and by other names. This goes a step further than even the revolutionary claim that all human beings, by virtue of being made in the image of God, collectively enjoy a basic set of rights and obligations (Gen. 9.5–6).

Interestingly, we could make a similar point about the creation theology in the book of Job, since this wise foreigner turns out to have a very similar perception of the divine ordering of creation as that which we find in Genesis 1, along with an ethic that seeks to protect the widow, orphan and stranger on the basis that they universally share a creator (Job 31, for example, arrives at this ethical conclusion solely on the basis of creation theology, in contrast with other ethical foundations that may arise from the covenantal obligations in Israelite law). The author of the book of Job, then, apparently wants to inform Israelites that there may well be foreigners out there in the world who understand perfectly well that the creator has given laws to all creatures. These observations about the dynamics of the Bible’s differentiated reflections on creation have the potential to expand the imagination of both believers and atheists and to challenge some of the epistemological assumptions both bring to their conversations.

Ultimately, it is perhaps not surprising that Christian and Jewish traditions relate to the creation event in ways that are not entirely commensurable with other approaches to the natural world. If world-making truth is characterized more by fidelity to an unprecedented Event than by objectivist procedures, then Badiou might indeed turn out to be in deep agreement with the Hebrew conception of truth as faithfulness.¹² A militant atheist like Dawkins will have little motivation to explore the ambiguities of the biblical canons and the capillaries of their socially formative effects. Badiou, in contrast, provides some understanding of why a fidelity to creation and recreation might endure, yet without being reducible to the domesticating order of a particular conceptual framework. I find myself regretful that genuine conversations with Dawkins and his followers do not seem to be possible, but Badiou's work indicates that there is still some hope for mutually edifying exchanges in the public domain.

Notes

1. See, e.g., the overview in Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).
2. Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 54.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), p. 237.
4. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
5. For an exemplary historical study of inner-biblical conversation, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
6. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), p. 43.
7. John M. G. Barclay, 'Paul and the Philosophers: Alain Badiou and the Event', *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010), pp. 171–84 (180).
8. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 108.
9. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007); James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
10. John W. Rogerson, *A Theology of the Old Testament: Cultural Memory, Communication and Being Human* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 45.
11. Rogerson, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 60.
12. Dennis Olson, 'Truth and the Torah: Reflections on Rationality and the Pentateuch', in A. G. Padgett and P. R. Keifert (eds), *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 16–33.

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