

MAKING THE TORAH COME ALIVE

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Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: GENESIS, God, Creation, and Destruction* (Regnery Faith)

I have known Dennis Prager for decades. He is not only a friend, he is one of the most brilliant, logical thinkers of our time. An Orthodox Jew, he is a cultural conservative who has much to impart. He is also courageous.

Prager's latest book is weighty in more ways than one. It tips the scale at 2.3 pounds and is rich with material. Over 500 pages long, it is nonetheless an easy read. He manages to do something no one else has done: He makes the Torah come alive.

Biblical works tend to be dry, but in the hands of Prager, this book is anything but. That's because he is more than a professor—he is a teacher. A professor professes; a teacher teaches. Regrettably, most professors can't teach worth a lick. Worse, many are so arrogant that they don't think it is their job to instill their students or readers with knowledge, never mind wisdom. They are content to babble or scribble, and they are good at both.

The Torah is the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians call the Old Testament. It is analyzed with precision by Prager, practically line by line. His style is felicitous, never speaking above the reader while never speaking down to him either. The text is also easy on the eye: the spacing between sentences is generous, and the book is peppered with extended essays on various parts of the Torah.

"I have written this book for people of every faith, and for people of no faith," he says. Very true. Indeed, Prager often has something specific to say to Jews, Christians, and atheists. He maintains that the prescription for the good

society is contained within the first five books of the Bible.

For Prager, the Torah is not just a holy book—it is divine. God, he says, is its ultimate source. Its Jewish cast shines clear: The Torah represents “a rejection of ancient Egypt and its values.” Proud of his heritage, he is not at all ethnocentric. In fact, he wants to reach a wide audience, sharing with Catholics, for example, many of the same values (it would be more accurate to say values that practicing Catholics share with observant Jews).

“I never ask the reader to accept anything I write on faith alone. If something I write does not make rational sense, I have not done my job.” That’s the teacher in Prager—it is important to him that we understand exactly what his faith has to offer. His job is to cajole, to persuade, to offer witness to the truth. He succeeds, and that is because (sounding very much like Pope Benedict XVI) he insists on abandoning “neither faith nor reason.”

Prager can squeeze meaning from the driest of verses. Genesis 3.12 reads, “The woman you put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate.” This refers to what Adam said to God about Eve. Prager astutely notes how “Adam not only shifted blame to the woman, he also blamed God.”

Yes, when Adam referred to Eve as “the woman You gave me,” Prager sees in that construction an attempt by Adam to say that “he never asked God to create the woman; and if God had not made her, he would never have eaten from that tree.” Prager uses this as a jumping off point to say that “Blaming others for wrongs we have done is literally as old as humanity.” This is “not only morally wrong; it makes emotional and moral growth impossible.”

What does the divine order look like? Prager lists several dualities: Human-God; Human-Animal; Man-Woman; Parent-Child; Life-Death; Good-Evil; Holy-Profane. Those realities are

challenged today, and nowhere is this more clear than in the mad insistence that there are no fundamental differences between men and women. Yet as Prager reminds us, God made "male and female." Importantly, "*this distinction is part of God's order*" (his italics).

The Lord instructed (Genesis 2.18), "It is not good for man to be alone." Prager quotes from John Milton in *Paradise Lost* what this means: "Loneliness is the first thing which God's eye named not good." Prager goes on to say how contemporary research has conclusively demonstrated the negative effects of loneliness (something which I documented in *The Catholic Advantage: How Health, Happiness, and Heaven Await the Faithful*).

How did God deal with Adam and Eve? "And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Genesis 3.21). Prager sees this as a statement by God that "he does not want human beings walking around naked." Its real significance should not be overlooked. "The obvious reason is sexual modesty. But there is an equally important, though much less obvious reason: Clothing distinguished the human being from, and elevates the human above, animals. Animals are naked, human beings are to be clothed."

The moral message of the Torah, Prager says, can easily be summed up: "God determines good and evil." Problems arise when man thinks he has no need for God, substituting his own intellectual prowess for that of the Almighty's. This is what totalitarians believe, and it is also why they carve up those who resist; the crazed social engineers see themselves as the arbiters of truth.

A close cousin to this idea, found in Chapter 8 of Genesis, is the belief that man is basically good, and all that is wrong is the result of bad policies instituted by wrongheaded people. That conviction—typically proffered by atheists and by those who see themselves as occupying the command centers of

the culture—rejects original sin, holding that God is morally unnecessary. Historically, that idea has had bloody consequences.

Believers have their problems as well.

Prager comments in Chapter 12 that it is not unusual for the faithful to have doubts. “I have rarely met a believing Jew who never experienced doubt,” he says. He admits that he has met a few Christians who say they have never experienced doubt, and he suspects there are more Muslims in that camp.

Significantly, he says it is one thing not to believe—that is not what doubt is—and another to be a believer who has doubts. For Jews, this is not hard to understand given that the word Israel literally means “struggle with God.” It is also not hard for Catholics to understand.

Mother Teresa herself confessed that there were times in her life that she did not feel the love of God, something she felt despondent about. This was interpreted by her enemies, chief among them being the English atheist Christopher Hitchens, who said this was proof that she “did not believe that Jesus was present in the Eucharist.”

Nonsense. There is a profound difference between doubting whether the touch of God is always present and rejecting belief in the Real Presence. Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, who promoted Mother Teresa’s cause for sainthood, and authored the book, *Come Be My Light* (a collection of her letters which contain examples of her “dark days”), said she “lived a trial of faith, not a crisis of faith.” This explains why she was “up at 4:30 every morning for Jesus, still writing to him, ‘Your happiness is all I want.’”

Chapter 28 of Genesis details another challenge for believers. “Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go.” This has unfortunately allowed many Christians and Jews to conclude that it is not fair for God not to intervene and

protect them from bad things. Prager has a more mature understanding of this verse.

“Many people believe God will protect them from tragedy,” he writes, “and when it turns out they have not been protected, they lose not only trust in God but even belief in God’s existence. That is one reason it is a bad idea to have such an image of God.”

Such a view, Prager informs, is irrational, and it inexorably leads to disillusionment. It is irrational because we have free will, thus we cannot reasonably expect that God will intervene whenever adversity strikes.

Also, always allowing for exceptions, “if God protects you or me, He will have to protect every decent person in the world. Otherwise, He would be an unfair and capricious God.”

Not to be misunderstood, Prager says that this “does not mean God never protects us or intervenes in any of our lives. I believe God intervenes in any number of people’s lives. We simply cannot expect Him to.” So what can we expect from God? We can expect that “God will honor His promises. And God will provide ultimate justice in the afterlife.”

Prager’s discussion of the afterlife is one of his most insightful in the book. He readily admits that most Jews do not believe in an afterlife, but then again most Jews are not observant. He argues in Chapter 25 that “it is a mistake to equate what most Jews believe with what Judaism teaches. Most Jews do not observe the Sabbath, yet Judaism clearly teaches observance of the Sabbath, which is one of the Ten Commandments.”

What counts most of all is the belief that *“if God is just, it is axiomatic there is an afterlife”* (his emphasis). Which gets us to the next question: What must we do to be saved?

On this issue, Prager, who works more closely with evangelical

Protestants than Catholics, takes the same position as enunciated by the Catholic Church: it takes faith and works to be saved.

He quotes from the Old Testament, "He [God] has told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). He quotes from the New Testament, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say that you have faith but do not have works?" (James 2:14).

Prager does not opine on whether atheists can be saved, but what he says about them is enlightening.

How do atheists explain existence? Or, as Prager puts it, "*Why is there anything?*" (his italics.) He acknowledges that believers cannot prove the existence of God, but at least they have a logical answer: "A Creator. God." What does the atheist have? Science?

Not so fast. "Science explains what is. But it cannot explain why what is came about—why something, rather than nothing, exists. Only a Creator of that something can explain why there is something rather than nothing." Atheists are in a bind. "To be an atheist is to believe that the universe came about by itself, life came from non-life by itself, and consciousness came about by itself." That simply does not make any sense.

The Rational Bible is a gift to believing Christians and Jews. It is also a book that everyone, regardless of faith, or none at all, can wean something of great value from. Chock full of cogent interpretations, logical conclusions, and persuasive advice, it has the added value of being based on sound scholarship. It is a stunning achievement.