

Fables

by Herb Silverman

I think I speak for many atheists who, while browsing the religion section in bookstores and noticing a portion of books set aside for religious fiction, say to themselves, “Isn’t that redundant?” Apparently, authors can usually choose whether to call their books fiction or nonfiction. But we don’t always know the author’s true identity, as with most of the stories contained in the Bible. We know that many of the biblical writers made up stories, some composed nice poetry, some described events that likely occurred, and some wrote “just so” stories to explain what they didn’t understand. I would classify nearly the entire Bible as fiction, especially the God stories. However, since many believe the Bible to be factual, bookstores won’t risk community outrage by filing it under “religious fiction.”

It’s difficult to identify the Bible with a loving deity, considering events like killing witches, slaying all women and children in a city, the blood of Jesus being on all Jews and their children, and killing homosexuals. The God of the Bible is no role model. He is a tyrant who orders the enslaving or killing of innocent people (including children) because they worship the wrong gods or live in lands that God wants his chosen people to occupy. God commands the Israelites to kill everything that breathes in Canaan. I agree with **Richard Dawkins** in *The God Delusion*: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

So what about people who believe the entire Bible is the inspired word of God? Even many of these biblical literalists now try to interpret some passages in more enlightened ways.

I identify more with progressive Christians who see countless biblical contradictions, as well as historical and scientific falsities. Such Christians don’t attempt to make sense out of nonsense. I also like what the Dalai Lama said about his religion, “If science proves facts that conflict with Buddhist understanding, Buddhism must change accordingly.”

A number of my liberal Christian friends not only ignore uncomfortable passages, but also agree with me on most progressive issues. One Christian friend who favors gay marriage pointed out that the Bible has countless passages about social justice and only five that condemn homosexuality. He didn’t have a good answer when I asked how many condemnations of homosexuality it would take to reverse his position. In comparison, the Bible has many passages in support of slavery, with nary a verse that condemns it.

If not all the Bible is the inspired word of a god, then a reader should choose only what make sense from the Bible or any other book. Fortunately, liberal Christians often focus on passages where God acts like a mensch, and ignore the rest. Perhaps these Christians are on a slippery slope that will lead them to secular humanism, which sounds to me like the real “Good News.” That’s probably what literalists fear is happening to thoughtful and questioning non-literalists.

How should we treat the Bible? I like what **Thomas Jefferson** did. He took a razor to the Christian Bible, cut out all miracle stories, and left in only what made sense to him.

Jefferson referred to what remained as “Diamonds in a dunghill.”

I like the idea of an amended bible devoid of passages that many God believers ignore, are embarrassed by, or interpret as the opposite of what the words say. This would not be a bible where poet **William Blake** could say, “Both read the Bible day and night, but thou read black where I read white.”

Who should write this new bible? Perhaps a committee of God believers who view the traditional Bible as inspired, but not inerrant, along with scientists and ethicists as advisors. After discussion, they could vote on what to include and exclude.

Is this heresy? No, it’s tradition! Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century brought church leaders together at the Council of Nicaea, and they voted the “word of God” into existence. And so it could be with my proposed second-chance bible for progressive religious believers, who have been informally amending the Bible with their thoughts and behavior. I’m just suggesting that such amendments be written on paper, not tablets.

Here’s how I might start a bible from the perspective of a scientifically literate God believer. Delete “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” and replace it with “In the beginning of time, about 13.7 billion years ago, God created our universe with a Big Bang.”

I don’t believe the “God-part,” but at least this bible can begin more accurately and move on to God’s “creating” the earth some 9 billion years after the Big Bang. The traditional Bible fits comfortably with the views of those who wrote it in a pre-scientific and misogynistic era. Scientists and humanists have since filled in many “God of the gaps” and moral gaps by those biblical writers some 2,000 to 3,000 years ago.

Any second-chance bible would be far from perfect. Future generations would look back and laugh about some of our current misconceptions and prejudices, which would inspire them to write a more perfect third bible. And so on. Maybe a day would eventually come when people accept a godless bible!

As a child, I enjoyed reading Aesop’s fables and biblical stories. Both have talking animals, along with moral lessons and universal truths. Leaving aside the question of which imparts better advice — though no Bible story was as consequential for me as Aesop’s “The boy who cried wolf” — at least Aesop’s stories are recognized as fables. One of the most productive ways to read the Bible is by identifying and discussing its fables. A book I’d like to see is a biblical equivalent to Aesop’s Fables, with different yet positive moral lessons. So I would like to propose a biblical fables book, which could stimulate conversation between atheists and theists. To inspire someone to write a biblical fables book, I’ll give five fables from Genesis, the first book of the Bible, followed by my moral lessons.

1. Matchmaker Fable

God notices that the first man he created is lonely. He parades a bunch of animals in front of Adam, but Adam remains lonely. God then fashions another human from Adam’s rib, with similar but not identical body parts. Adam prefers Eve to all the other animals.

Moral: Humans and most other species are social animals. Solitude has its rewards, but so does the company of others.



It's good to associate and cooperate with people whose values we share. Learn about other kinds, but recognize those with whom you can communicate well and trust.

2. Serpent Fable

God tells Adam he may eat anything in a garden but the fruit from one tree, saying he will die on the day he eats it. A snake convinces Eve that she will gain knowledge after eating the forbidden fruit. Eve eats, likes what she learns, and encourages Adam to partake. They discover many things, including sex, and God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden and tells them they need to work for a living.

Moral: God makes blind obedience the supreme virtue, assuming ignorance is bliss. God either lied or was mistaken when he said humans would die on the day they received knowledge. So don't blindly believe, even if you pay a price for independent thought. It's better to have freedom without a guarantee of security than to have security without freedom.

3. Cain and Abel Fable

Adam and Eve's two sons bring offerings to God, but God gives no reason for accepting Abel's and rejecting Cain's. Cain gets jealous and kills Abel. When God asks Cain where Abel is, Cain responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God curses Cain, who must then wander the earth, but God places a protective mark on Cain.

Moral: The first worship ceremony is quickly followed by the first murder, which shows we must not put our love and worship of a god above our love for human beings. Cain belatedly learns that humans should look out for one another, making each of us our brother's and sister's keeper. God recognizes his culpability in the first murder and puts a mark on Cain as a sign to those he meets that they must not do to Cain what Cain did to Abel.

4. Tower of Babel Fable

Men in the city of Babel decide to build a tower to heaven. God thwarts this activity by confusing their language, and the men are scattered throughout the world.

Moral: Leaders must not become as insecure as God, who prevented others from cooperating and moving upward together. Also, there is value in diversity. Each of us must decide when to go along with the crowd and when to set out on a road not taken.

5. Binding of Isaac Fable

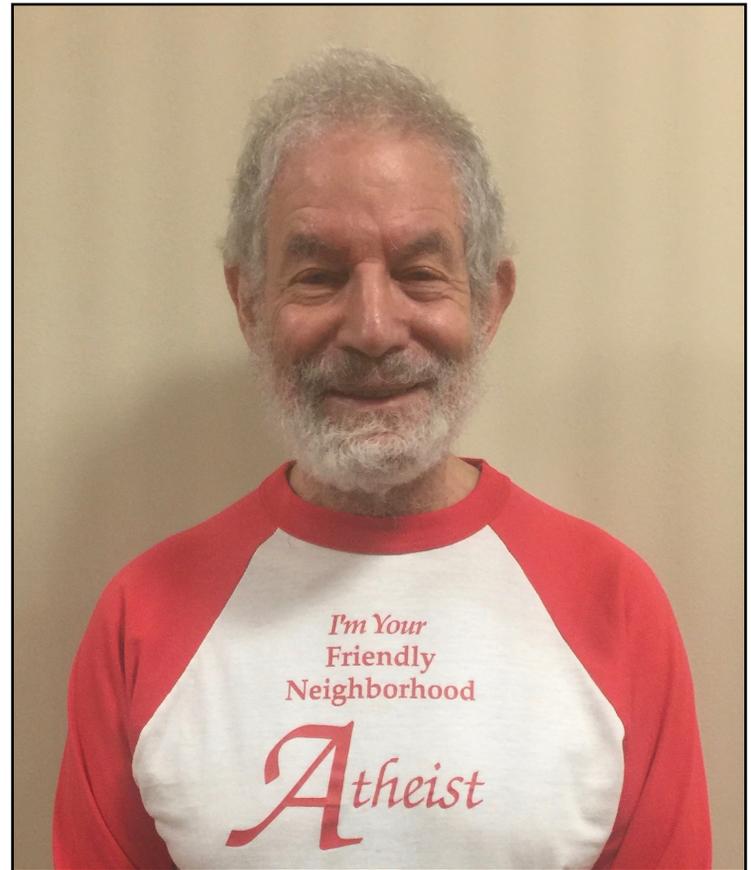
God commands Abraham to kill his son Isaac. Abraham acquiesces, but God stops Abraham as he lifts his knife, and provides a lamb to take Isaac's place.

Moral: God tests Abraham, who fails the test. Nobody should commit an atrocity, no matter who makes the request. It is better to do good than to have faith.

Atheists almost never put the character "God" in a good light, and God's behavior is particularly egregious in Genesis. But as the Bible proceeds, God learns from some of his early mistakes and improves, as pointed out in **Robert Wright's**, *The Evolution of God*. There are hundreds of biblical fables, and atheists might find some in which to "praise God." Such praise would show that atheists don't hate the biblical god any more than they hate Zeus.

An atheist's insights into the Bible would be different from those of either liberal or conservative religionists. I think

the Bible is an important book to read because it is so influential in our culture. This common bond between atheists and theists might help atheists articulate their differences more effectively with some theists. And I think such enhanced communication would be a worthwhile experience for all participants.



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Silverman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston, South Carolina. He founded the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and is founder and first faculty advisor to the College of Charleston student Atheist/Humanist Alliance.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won an unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court which struck down this religious test requirement.

Silverman is president emeritus of the Secular Coalition for America. He served as president of the Secular Coalition through December of 2012 and again from December 2014 to June 2017.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Designating "The Freethought Society" as your chosen AmazonSmile benefits recipient, automatically increases the organization's funds.