# Review of Dennis Prager on Genesis

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Book Review

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Regnery Faith, 2019)

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Dennis Prager is far better known as a political commentator than a Bible Scholar. Nonetheless, he is animated by his belief in the Torah and its enduring moral messages for humanity. His commentary, as the book's title suggests, is rooted in a rationalist approach to the Bible.

Whether or not one agrees with all of his politics or individual interpretations of the verses, Prager's commentary is strikingly relevant when he emphasizes the moral revolution of the Torah and the vitality of its moral teachings to today's overly secularized Western world. Rather than serving as bastions of moral teachings and American values, universities are increasingly at the vanguard of attacks against God, the Bible, family values, Israel, and the very notion of an objective morality. Prager pinpoints several of the major differences between the Torah's morality and the dangerous shortcomings of today's secular West.

Throughout his commentary, Prager makes his case for belief in God, providence, the divine origins of the Torah, and the eternal power of the Torah's morality. He also offers a running commentary on the Torah, bringing insights from a wide variety of scholars and thinkers, as well as from his personal experiences. In this review, we will focus exclusively on the former, as it is here that the commentary makes its greatest contributions.

God’s creation of the world teaches that there is ultimate purpose to human existence. Atheists reject God’s existence. If all existence is random happenstance, however, there is no ultimate purpose. Additionally, the Torah posits that God is completely separate from nature. God gave human beings a special role, and the moral God demands morality from humanity. Science teaches science, but it cannot teach right from wrong, or even if there is a right or a wrong. Science cannot provide ultimate purpose, since it studies only the physical universe (7-8).

The world began as chaotic (*tohu va-vohu*, Genesis 1:2), and God created order through a process of distinctions. According to the Torah, the primary responsibility of humanity is to preserve God’s order and distinctions. The creation narrative in Genesis distinguishes between God and the universe, humans and animals, and sacred and profane. Elsewhere in the Torah, God distinguishes between people and God, good and evil, life and death, and many others. The battle for higher civilization essentially is the struggle between biblical distinctions and the human desire to undo many of those distinctions. Prager concludes with a chilling assertion about the contemporary West: “As Western society abandons the Bible and the God of the Bible, it is also abandoning these distinctions. I fear for its future because Western civilization rests on these distinctions” (14).

Pagans believed that the gods inhere in nature. This belief led to the need for people to propitiate the gods and offer sacrifices. By stressing that God is outside of nature, the Torah revolutionizes the role of humanity vis a vis the world. People must rule and conquer the earth, meaning that the world was created for human use (1:28). People must not abuse nature or inflict unnecessary suffering on animals, but people rule the world. Among other things, this belief led to the invention of modern medicine to fight diseases. Prager warns of a relapse to the pagan worldview: “Many secular people in our time romanticize nature, perhaps not realizing—or not wanting to realize—that either humans rule over nature or nature will destroy humans” (27).

Without the values of the Bible, people lose their uniqueness as being created in God’s image (1:26), and instead become insignificant parts of nature. British physicist and atheist Stephen Hawking said, “We humans [are] mere collections of fundamental particles of nature.” When God is diminished and nature is elevated, human worth is reduced (104). Finally, without God, people are simply another part of nature. There cannot be any good or evil behavior for humanity, just as we would not call an earthquake evil. “Therefore, as ironic as it may sound to a secular individual, only a God-based understanding of human life

allows for free will” (505-506).

It is not good for man to be alone (2:18). People ideally were meant to marry and to live together in a community. In the secular West, there has been a dramatic decrease in marriage rates, and more people live by themselves than at any time in recorded history. Consequently, loneliness has become a major social pathology. A meta-analysis of 70 studies covering over three million people published in the journal ‘Perspectives on Psychological Science’ concludes that “loneliness is now a major public health issue and represents a greater health risk than obesity and is as destructive to your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.” Prager also quotes the moral benefits of participating in a religious community. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks summarizes the research of Robert Putnam: “Regular attendees at a place of worship were more likely than others to give money to charity, engage in volunteer work, donate blood, spend time with someone who is depressed, offer a seat to a stranger, help someone find a job…Regular attendance at a house of worship is the most accurate predictor of altruism, more so than any other factor, including gender, education, income, race, region, marital status, ideology and age” (39-41).

God expressed grave concern over Adam and Eve’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge, lamenting that “man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:22). Prager frames the sin in Eden as the struggle over who determines morality. The Torah teaches that God does, but human sin is when people determine good and evil. When people usurp that right, people become god. “And it is precisely what has happened in the West since the French Enlightenment. Man has displaced God as the source of right and wrong. As Karl Marx wrote, ‘Man is God.’ And as Lenin, the father of modern totalitarianism, said, ‘We repudiate all morality derived from non-human (i.e., God) and non-class concepts’” (59).

Human conscience alone cannot bring about a just society. Conscience can be easily manipulated when serving a cause. Conscience can be dulled when people do more and more bad. Conscience also is not usually as powerful as the natural drives—greed, envy, sex, alcohol and others can overpower the conscience. And finally, conscience does not always guide someone properly to do what is right. We need God to teach objective moral values (108-109). “Even Voltaire (1694-1778), a passionate atheist and the godfather of the aggressively secular French Enlightenment, acknowledged: ‘I want my lawyer, my tailor, my servants, and even my wife to believe in God because it means that I shall be cheated, and robbed, and cuckolded less often. If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him’” (239).

Those who admire the achievements of successful people likely will strive to emulate them. Those who are jealous and resentful of the success of others become destructive. Rather than improving his offering, Cain instead envied Abel's successful sacrifice and murdered him. The Philistines envied Abraham and Isaac, and therefore destructively filled up Abraham's wells and persecuted Isaac (Genesis 26). Economist George Gilder (a non-Jew) wrote about this phenomenon in his book, *The Israel Factor*. He demonstrates that a society's reaction to Israel's successes is a predictor of their success or failure. Those who resent the outsized achievements of Israel are likely to fail morally, economically, and socially. Those who admire Israel and seek to emulate its achievements are likely to create their own free and prosperous societies (65). Prager draws a lesson for contemporary America: "The most notable exception to this unfortunate rule of human nature has been the American people. Until almost the present day, Americans tended to react to people who had attained material success not by resenting them but by wanting to know how they could emulate them. This seems to be changing as more Americans join others in resenting the economic success of other people" (308).

The Torah describes Noah as "a righteous man, blameless in his age." The Sages of the Talmud debate whether the Torah's addition of "in his age" diminishes his objective righteousness, or whether it makes Noah all the more impressive for standing above his wicked society. Although both positions are valid, Prager supports the latter view, observing that few people have the moral courage to reject their environment. Prager adds a more important point: Many are tempted to judge people of the past by our contemporary moral standards, rather than in the context of their time. As a result, we would conclude that virtually nobody who lived before us was a good person. For example, many of the founding fathers of America owned slaves, and America allowed slavery at the time of its founding. Since slavery is indeed evil, we may conclude that America's founders were bad men and America itself was a bad place. However, it is vital to judge America in 1776 "in its age," and not by the standards of our time. At that time, virtually every society practiced slavery. It was the values of America's founders and Western Bible-based civilization that led to the abolition of slavery, and the thriving of freedom-loving and freedom-spreading society (91-93).

After the flood, God concludes that He never again will destroy humanity, "since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth" (8:21). Prager uses this verse as a springboard to attack a modern Western belief, that people are basically good and corrupted by society. The belief emerges from the West's abandonment of the Bible, and is associated with philosophers of the French Enlightenment such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). No rational person

can believe that people are basically good. All children need moral teachings to learn the most basic decency. The unjust wars, slavery, child abuse, and so many other horrors of world history down to the present should be ample evidence that people must actively build a good society. The wrongful belief that people are basically good also is dangerous. Parents and schools will not invest time and energy teaching goodness if they assume that children are naturally good. God and religion become irrelevant to teaching goodness. Society, not the individual, is blamed for evil. Those who blame society try to change society, rather than teaching individuals to be better. “The Torah teaches that, especially in a free society, the battle for a good world is not between the individual and society but between the individual and his or her nature” (109-115).

Making good people is the single most important thing parents can do. Loving children without teaching them moral responsibility turns children into narcissists. Parents must constantly emphasize goodness, integrity, and honesty, and praise these traits as most important. Parents also must morally discipline their children, rather than ignoring that responsibility. Teaching the Bible only can help, both because the Bible is unparalleled in its moral wisdom, and it is valuable for children (and their parents) to recognize God as the source of morality (132-133).

Through these and so many other religious-moral teachings, the Torah was a revolution in world history, and continues to bring relevant teaching to the modern world.