Book Review: Dennis Prager on Deuteronomy

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Book Review

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Deuteronomy* (Regnery Faith, 2022)

This review is a sequel to my reviews of Dennis Prager's volumes on Genesis and Exodus, found at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-genesis and https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-exodus.

Throughout the contemporary West, we find increasingly aggressive elements in our government, universities, schools, media, and many other influential venues that viciously attack God, the Bible, family values, the very notion of an objective morality, and many other core ideals we cherish. Many of the biblical principles America is built upon are brutalized or at best ignored.

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. 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 increasingly secularized Western world. Prager pinpoints several of the major differences between the Torah's morality and the dangerous shortcomings of today's secular West. In this review, we will focus on several of his central points.

In Deuteronomy 1:13, Moses selected judges who were “wise, discerning, and experienced.” All three traits pertain to wisdom, not goodness. Of course, judges also must be good people, but that trait alone is insufficient for leadership. A good society is unattainable without wisdom. Prager observes that “there have always been people who were personally good—individuals who have good intentions and even a kindly disposition—who enabled evil to prevail.”

On a personal level, parents who spoil their children without teaching them right from wrong may be good people, but they lack wisdom. On a global level, communism is the best example of good intentions without wisdom. Communism has killed approximately 100 million people, and enslaved a billion more. Their tyrannical leaders, and some of their supporters, are truly evil people. But many millions of their supporters sincerely believed that communism would build a better world for the future. However, they lacked moral and economic wisdom, thereby supporting and enabling the evil tyrants to obtain and retain power (6-10).

The world’s freest society, the United States of America, is both a democracy and theocracy. Theocracy without democracy leads to an unfree society. Democracy without God leads to moral and intellectual chaos. George Washington stated, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports…reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” In a similar vein, John Adams remarked that “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” Prager observes that it is no accident that the two mottoes of the United States are “Liberty” and “In God We Trust” (283-285).

The Book of Deuteronomy repeatedly warns against following false gods. Prager enumerates several of today’s “false gods” (71-84). One of the most corrosive elements to the fabric of our increasingly secular society is the elimination of God and the Bible, and replacing its wisdom with an overvaluation of education and intelligence.

Prager quotes Professor Steven Pinker of Harvard University, who observes that “universities are becoming laughingstocks of intolerance.” Well-educated

people disproportionately supported the Nazi party, as well as communism. The same is true for those today who hold anti-American and Israeli sentiments.

In 2015 Prager participated in a debate at the prestigious Oxford Union at Oxford University on the subject of whether Israel or Hamas is a greater obstacle for peace in the Middle East. That this debate could even occur is truly terrifying, given the terrorist organization Hamas' genocidal charter. Yet, the debate went on, and the majority of the over 400 elite students in attendance voted that Israel is the greater obstacle to peace, as this is what they are taught.

Education uncoupled from God and morality becomes a false, and a very dangerous, god. Among those naïve enough to think otherwise was Sigmund Freud, who confidently stated in 1927 that secular education could replace religion as the basis for a moral society: "Civilization has little to fear from educated people and brain-workers. In them the replacement of religious motives for civilized behaviors by other, secular motives would proceed unobtrusively." Within ten years of making that statement, Freud witnessed many of his fellow Austrian and German intellectuals support Nazism and even participate in the atrocities.

Of course, people who claim to be religious can be evil, and people who do not believe in God can be exceptionally moral. The issue is society and its institutions. Without religious core values, secular society almost inevitably loses its wisdom, and then risks becoming evil.

The Book of Deuteronomy promises national reward for righteous behavior, and national calamity for wicked behavior and unfaithfulness to God. To the modern mind, such promises often appear to reflect a low-level religious system. Prager defends the Torah's discourse on several grounds (142-143).

First, the Torah could have omitted all reference to reward and punishment. This idealistic system is simply untrue to human reality. When people are rewarded for competent work, they work harder and more competently. This is why the capitalistic free market economy was the only system that enabled people to lift themselves out of poverty. Some are seduced by the Marxist socialist ideal of people being rewarded "according to their needs," rather than for the excellence of their work. This ideology, however, eliminates the incentive to work hand. Further, who determines the "needs" of individuals? Generally not the individual, but the state. This is the road to tyranny and totalitarianism.

Prager concludes, “And who doesn’t want to live in a just world? Only the unjust.”

The Torah could have shifted focus to reward in the afterlife, but its entire agenda is to build a great society in this world.

Finally, the Torah could have demanded faithfulness based on love of God. However, that argument would work only for the religiously elite few.

Therefore, the Torah’s stress on this-worldly reward and punishment is the most effective means of promoting a universally righteous society.

A central theme in Deuteronomy is gratitude. God blesses Israel with a beautiful, bountiful land. The religious hazard of that blessing is that Israel may in turn become spoiled and arrogant, considering their prosperity as their own achievement. Prager comments that “gratitude is the mother of both happiness and goodness.” The easiest way to undermine gratitude is to take something or someone for granted. Most people appreciate what they had only once they have lost it. Parents spoil their children when they give them everything, as children come to expect everything. Saying “thank you” is not merely polite etiquette; these words inculcate gratitude and appreciation. Jewish law has blessings for everything, including eating and even relieving oneself in the bathroom. These blessings, when taken seriously, infuse gratitude and happiness into the most mundane moments (154-156).

In Deuteronomy 12:20, the Torah permits “secular slaughter” away from the Temple, enabling Israelites to eat meat outside of a sacrificial context. Prager uses this commandment to launch into a discussion regarding animal rights activism gone awry in the secular world. There is an increasingly prevalent value of people and animals being of equal worth. Prager quotes a 2003 PETA ad campaign, which appallingly equated barbequing chickens with the cremation of Jews in the Nazi death camps. They entitled their ad campaign, “Holocaust on your Plate.” It was a Jew at PETA who created that ad campaign, and he doubled down on his assertion that chickens and humans are of equal value when he was challenged.

In Deuteronomy 19:13, the Torah insists that we show no pity for murderers. The Torah understands that if we see the condemned, we naturally will have pity, and consider withholding the capital punishment. However, such pity overrides the true victims, namely, the person who was murdered and his or her family. In a debate on American television with the leader of an anti-capital punishment vigil being held in front of the prison where a murderer was about to be executed, Prager “asked the activist if he and his supporters had ever held a vigil in support of a murder victim’s family. I received no response” (303-304).

We should lead the world in morality, but not promote a morality so far beyond realism that we subject ourselves to mortal danger. Prager quotes Rabbi Irving (“Yitz”) Greenberg reflecting on the modern State of Israel, surrounded by vicious enemies committed to Israel’s destruction: “If we Jews are five percent better than the rest of the world, we can be a ‘light unto the nations.’ If we are twenty-five percent better than the rest of the world, we can bring the Messiah. If we are fifty percent better than the rest of the world, we’ll all be dead” (316).

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