

Correctly (or incorrectly?) dividing the Word

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible

Robert J. Hutchinson

Regnery Publishing, Washington, D.C.,
2007

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The Bible says some things that would be considered ‘politically incorrect’ in the twenty-first century. The defense of the faith is sometimes a politically incorrect act. But there’s no inherent virtue in being ‘politically incorrect’. So when we began reading *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible*, we didn’t know what to expect. Would this book be a good defense of the Bible against the kinds of ‘politically correct’ silliness that is too often used as a critique of Scripture? Or would it be a poor presentation of Scripture, undermined by a kind of ‘politically incorrect’ silliness?

Thankfully, Robert Hutchinson usually resists the temptation to indulge in unnecessarily provocative claims lest they be considered ‘politically incorrect’ (with a few exceptions). In fact, contrary to our expectations, he sometimes goes to the opposite extreme, trying so hard to adopt a ‘reasonable’ or ‘moderate’ tone that he concedes too much to the Bible’s ‘politically correct’ critics.

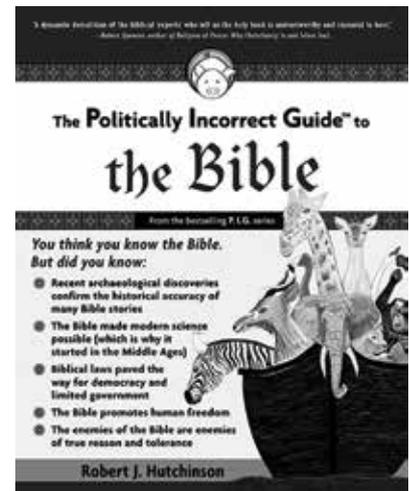
Admittedly, Hutchinson is in a difficult position for a writer. Hutchinson is a journalist with theological training from Fuller Theological Seminary. His job in this book is to defend the Bible from its critics. He has to do so as part of a series, the *Politically Incorrect Guides*, which have been designed for, and marketed to, conservative Americans, defined

politically and socially. The problem is that ‘conservative Americans’ constitute a theologically nebulous demographic. Politically conservative Americans are statistically more likely to be theologically conservative and to have a high view of the Bible. But exactly how they will handle various challenges to the Bible’s authority varies widely depending on whether one is, for example, Catholic, Baptist, or Pentecostal. (And of course, not all conservative Americans are Christians of any stripe.) Throughout his book, Hutchinson seems to be trying very hard to speak for all of the politically and religiously conservative Christians—and sometimes for conservative Jews as well. But inclusivity comes at a price. Hutchinson tiptoes around key issues—like inerrancy—maintaining a noncommittal position that often feels forced.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible is made up of chapters that (more often than not) stand on their own. Some of the chapters focus on presenting underappreciated benefits brought to the modern world by the Bible, such as modern science and political freedom. But most of the chapters focus on refuting the critics of the Bible. These critics span the spectrum from extremely hostile atheists (such as the New Atheists) to more moderate religious liberals.

Biblical inspiration and inerrancy

Hutchinson aims to defend the Bible from its critics. But how one defends the Bible depends very much on one’s view of the Bible itself. The two key issues here are inspiration and inerrancy. Inspiration is the parent doctrine of inerrancy. The doctrine



of inspiration is a statement about where Scripture comes from (God or man), while the doctrine of inerrancy is a statement about the accuracy of the text itself. Hutchinson obviously has a great deal of respect for the Bible. When he addresses the issues of inspiration and inerrancy early in the book, he starts out promisingly enough. He affirms a traditional view of biblical inspiration, acknowledging both the longstanding belief of Christians and Jews that ‘the Bible is divinely inspired’, containing revelation from God, and that the Bible itself claims repeatedly to be the Word of God. For instance, he notes, “The Book of Leviticus alone has sixty-six instances in which it says, ‘The Lord spoke unto Moses ...’” (pp. 44–45). Josephus and the writers of the New Testament all provided early testimony to the Jewish position, believing that Scripture is from God and divinely inspired. This was the Jewish understanding adopted by the early Christians as well. Hutchinson notes that Jesus himself referenced the Hebrew Scriptures as the Word of God (for instance, quoting Genesis in Matthew 15:6).

But Hutchinson lapses into squishiness when it comes to the subject of inerrancy. He doesn’t quite want to affirm Scripture’s inerrancy but he doesn’t want to deny it either. After quoting Paul’s statement to

Timothy about the nature of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15–16), Hutchinson writes: “[T]he Jewish scriptures are indeed ‘God-breathed’ (or inspired) and ‘profitable.’” But he quickly qualifies this:

“But note: Paul says *nothing* about scripture being ‘inerrant’, or useful for studying astrophysics, or even as a primary source for historical study. These are *later* controversies projected backward onto the Bible [emphasis in original]” (p. 48).

It certainly *sounds* like Hutchinson is trying to move toward a more liberal position on the authority and accuracy of Scripture. But then he qualifies this too: “That doesn’t mean the Bible isn’t inerrant necessarily, only that the primary emphasis ... is on the *practical use* of the biblical texts ...” (p. 48). It’s an exasperating paragraph. At one level, theological conservatives might agree with what Hutchinson says here—that the *term* ‘inerrancy’ was first used in later debates and that Paul’s *emphasis* was on the *use* of the Scripture. But this doesn’t mean that Paul doesn’t *also* imply a doctrine of inerrancy. As with many theological terms, there was no need to spell out the biblical teaching with technical terminology until it was necessary to refute errors.¹

But it seems that Hutchinson is suggesting much more in his statement about Paul’s ‘emphasis’. Hutchinson’s line of reasoning is typical of those who are willing to adhere to the spiritual and moral teaching of Scripture without necessarily committing themselves to the accuracy of the history recorded in Scripture. Yet he won’t quite commit to this liberal approach to Scripture either. We would argue that the doctrine of inspiration by a totally truthful and all-knowing God *entails* inerrancy (properly defined). Hutchinson does not address this argument directly.

Instead, he then describes what he sees as the three main approaches to

the relationship between inspiration and inerrancy. First, he writes, “Mainline or more liberal Protestant denominations believe that God speaks through the biblical texts ...” Yet these denominations would hold that “many of the minor ‘details’ can be in error”.

Second, “Conservative Protestants and Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, believe that ... the Bible is ‘inerrant’ in everything that it affirms.” As a representative of this position, Hutchinson quotes at length from the prominent evangelical theologian Norman Geisler. Geisler notes that not everything *recorded* in the Bible is taught as *truth*—for instance, not every *part* of a parable is necessarily conveying a truth, not every action recorded is endorsed, sometimes figurative language is used, and the writers can adopt common observational standpoints rather than speaking in absolute terms. For instance, the Bible can speak of the sun’s “path through the sky” without implying that in fact the earth is stationary and the sun is moving—it is no more inaccurate to speak this way than it is for the meteorologist to talk about sunrise and sunset. It is simply a matter of choosing which reference frame to use, and in physics, one can choose whatever frame is most convenient as long as it’s stated which one is being used. Most of Geisler’s points (as quoted by Hutchinson) are ones that we would agree with, although even there, a few unnecessary concessions creep in. At one point, Geisler suggests that divine inspiration does not guarantee that “all factual assertions are technically precise by modern standards (as opposed to accurate by ancient standards—2 Chr. 4:2)” (p. 49). In some contexts he might have a point (casualties from a battle might be given in rounded numbers, for instance). But in the passage from 2 Chronicles that he cites, it’s unnecessary. In giving the

diameter and radius of the large water basin in Solomon’s temple, it at first seems the biblical author was unaware of pi and hence gave an inaccurate measurement. But the numbers given in Chronicles actually work quite well if one adds the thickness of the basin itself into the calculations.²

Hutchinson cites as the third Christian position that of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. He asserts that the Catholic church joins conservative Protestants in its belief in the ‘inerrancy’ of “what is actually ... taught or implied” by the Bible. He adds, again somewhat ambiguously, “In practice, the Catholic approach is closer to that of mainline Protestant denominations in its use of contemporary biblical scholarship but closer to conservative Protestants in its doctrinal formulations” (p. 51). We don’t get any further explanation, but in many ways this somewhat cryptic remark best characterizes the course Hutchinson himself tries to steer throughout the book. While staunchly defending what he sees as core doctrines, Hutchinson is willing to try to incorporate mainstream contemporary scholarship whenever possible. Of course, there is nothing



Photo: Wikimedia/Daniel Baránek

Figure 1. A fragment of an Isaiah Scroll (Isa. 57:17–59:9) from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The discovery of these scrolls provided powerful evidence for the integrity of the biblical text across the centuries.



Photo: Wikipedia/Tornistik

Figure 2. A page showing the end of the Gospel of Luke from the Codex Alexandrinus, a 5th-century New Testament manuscript.

wrong with employing contemporary scholarship, so long as Scripture is truly being honored.³ But the devil is in the detail. When does ‘contemporary scholarship’ start to compromise Scripture? Hutchinson, it seems, sometimes has a hard time making up his mind.

Errors in the Bible?

Hutchinson gets to the nuts and bolts when he begins to deal with some of the most common ‘errors in the Bible’ trotted out by skeptics. Hutchinson discusses ‘inconsistencies’, ‘errors of quotation’, ‘historical errors’, and ‘scientific errors’. On the whole, Hutchinson does a fine job countering these attacks. Often, this is easy to do. For instance, a number of the alleged inconsistencies in Scripture only appear inconsistent when recklessly misread by skeptics. For instance, is Genesis inconsistent when it says that Noah took animals into the Ark by twos in one place and in seven pairs in another? The answer is right in the text (“by twos” is the *mode of entry* of all animals; seven pairs refers to the *number of clean* animals—i.e. six additional pairs of the clean ones). One

issue where Hutchinson is not at the top of his game, however, is the dates of various biblical texts. In general, for both the Old and New Testaments, liberal scholars tend to give late dates while conservative scholars give earlier dates. Hutchinson tends to adopt the late dates without seeming to be very aware of the fact that there is controversy about them.

In defending the Bible’s history, Hutchinson offers a concise overview of some major archeological discoveries that have supported the Bible’s historical narratives. For instance, he mentions the Samaritan ostraca found in 1910, a collection of potsherds with the names of most of the sons of Manasseh from Joshua 17:2–3, substantiating the genealogical records of Scripture. He discusses the Pontius Pilate inscription found in 1962, countering the critics who had questioned whether Pilate was a historical figure. And he notes the House of David inscription found in 1993, countering the scholars who had questioned whether David was a historical figure (pp. 21–27).

Origins

Hutchinson’s treatment of the origins issue is disappointing. He uncritically accepts a standard Darwinian model of biological evolution and sidelines the debate over creation and evolution as an almost irrelevant side-show. He devotes a single paragraph to Intelligent Design (ID):

“[T]here are religious groups and thinkers who have pointed out ... ‘holes’ in the naturalistic theories of evolution Many biological scientists now concede that the available scientific evidence (in the form of the fossil record) does not wholly support Darwin’s theory ...” (p. 89).

This brief treatment indicates that Hutchinson is not familiar with the issues. It is a very inadequate

description of ID’s arguments, many of which are based on grounds other than the fossil record. And then it’s not clear what Hutchinson means when he refers to “many biological scientists”. If he means that there are a non-trivial number of serious, qualified biologists who are critics of mainstream Darwinism, then he’s right. But he certainly makes it sound like there are large numbers of biologists across the profession who are admitting that the fossil record is a good critique of evolution, which isn’t true.

In any case, Hutchinson believes that the debates over Darwinism are irrelevant because they are “scientific in nature, not theological” (p. 90). He nowhere seems to indicate that he realizes there are serious theological issues involved in the design-versus-Darwin debate. Even the ID community, with its theologically minimalist position, has occasionally raised a quasi-theological issue—the relationship of methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism.⁴ Darwinists (such as Michael Ruse⁵) have argued that the former doesn’t necessarily lead to the latter, but in any case, it can hardly be correct that there is no theological connection here. If Hutchinson had consulted any serious creationist literature, of course, he would have learned that there are many other theological issues raised by Darwinism—from the problem of death before sin to the exegetical problem of reconciling Genesis 1–11 with Darwinism.

Hutchinson suggests that the primary concern is nothing more or less than the special status of human beings:

“Where people of faith disagree most with secularists is not over the *mechanics* of creation but over a central point of Genesis that human beings are precious in the eyes of the Creator ...” (p. 91).

While he is wrong to see this as the *only* significant issue, he is certainly right to see this as an *important* one, and he does a good job explaining the basics of why creation is important for human dignity.

The morality of the Bible

Hutchinson spends time in several chapters addressing controversial issues of biblical morality. First, he looks at the critics of the Bible's own morality. Skeptics have often enjoyed criticizing the Bible as an immoral book, pointing out that it records many acts of murder, rape, and violence. Hutchinson notes that some of the atheist criticisms are easily dismissed—just because the Bible records a historical instance of rape or violence doesn't mean that it is condoning that conduct. The more challenging issue is God's command for Israel to annihilate the Canaanite nations. The Bible's critics love to point to this and claim that God commanded genocide. Hutchinson responds by explaining the radical evil represented by the Canaanite societies and noting that God's command is a unique circumstance, not repeated elsewhere.

He doesn't fully articulate the heart of the issue (that God hates sin and is eminently entitled to judge it⁶) or the full depth of the depravity of the Canaanite nations (for instance, child sacrifice), but he manages to at least put the issue into perspective.

Hutchinson is even better on the issue of slavery. He explains rightly that the 'slavery; or bond-service allowed by the Mosaic Law was drastically different (in most forms, more akin to indentured servitude) from the kind of chattel slavery that we typically associate with slavery. He notes that historically it was the Bible and Christianity that provided crucial motivation for the abolition of slavery. Christians led the way to abolishing slavery in the Roman Empire and again in Britain and America.

Hutchinson is at his best when he explains the biblical positions on the sanctity of life and the proscription of homosexual behaviour. On both issues, he articulates the generally accepted Christian position clearly. In his discussion of homosexuality in particular, he does an effective job of countering the revisionists who have claimed that the Bible doesn't really speak to the issue.

The positive legacy of the Bible

Throughout the book, Hutchinson frequently comments on the Bible's immensely important contributions to the modern world—contributions that even the Bible's critics benefit from, even though they often refuse to recognize the Bible as the source. The two issues that Hutchinson devotes the most space to are political freedom and the rise of science. On the issue of science, Hutchinson relies on the scholarship of sociologist Rodney Stark, who has argued that modern science is uniquely a product of a Christian worldview. This argument is already familiar to readers of this journal.⁷ Briefly stated, it posits that the Christian understanding of God and creation allowed medieval Europeans to come to see nature as something that could be expected to behave in regular patterns. The Christian understanding of man, created in the image of God, provided the foundation for believing that nature would be understandable to human reason. While Stark himself sometimes overgeneralizes, the argument on the whole is sound, and Hutchinson does a good job of explaining it for a general audience.

Political freedom, too, can be traced to the biblical understanding of God and man. Hutchinson outlines two related lines of Christian thought, rooted in the Bible, that led to the liberty that is enjoyed by so many Westerners today.⁸ First, the Bible provided a set of concepts—human dignity and a divine law of right and wrong—that led to the articulation of human rights in the natural law traditions of both theologians (like Aquinas) and legal thinkers (like Blackstone). Second, Christians found in the Bible a basis for limiting the authority of government and ultimately even resisting tyrannical usurpation by the government when it went beyond its rightful authority. Hutchinson's presentation is lacking in some historical nuance, and sometimes it feels like he padded the section with



Figure 3. The Cyrus Cylinder, dated from 539 BC and now in the British Museum, provides evidence of Cyrus' effort to repatriate the Jews following the Babylonian captivity.

a few too many quotes and statistics. But the basic argument is sound.

Conclusion

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible is an uneven book. Hutchinson tackled a daunting task in this book, addressing issues of history, theology, archeology, science, and philosophy. He is not equally at home in all of these fields and it shows. Some issues are tackled quite well, given the constraints of the book (Hutchinson is writing for a general readership, not for scholars, so a certain level of simplification is understandable and even necessary). But other issues seem to be treated based on hasty research and an insufficient grasp of the issues. At the most fundamental level, it is unclear whether Hutchinson really has a clear idea of what aspects of the Bible to defend and when he should accept the arguments of liberal scholars.

References

1. Many of the creeds of the church were formulated to refute heresies (the Nicene Creed, for instance, was written to refute the Arian heresy, which claimed that Jesus was a created being).
2. See, e.g., Grigg, R., 'Does the Bible say pi equals 3.0?' *Creation* 17(2):24–25, 1995; creation.com/pi; Morris, J.D., Does the Bible Contain a Mathematically Incorrect Value for 'Pi'?, www.icr.org/article/524/2/, accessed 13 January 2013.
3. Indeed, it is only appropriate that believers *should* be willing to employ the best scholarship, so long as it doesn't compromise Scripture.
4. This was a concern of Phillip Johnson's books, *Darwin on Trial* (1991) and *Reason in the Balance* (1998), both key works for the ID movement.
5. See Ruse, M., *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship Between Science and Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.
6. For a recent exposition of this theme, see Jones, C., We don't hate sin so we don't understand what happened to the canaanites: an addendum to 'divine genocide' arguments, *Philosophia Christi* 11(1):53–72, 2009.
7. See Williams, A., The biblical origins of science: a review of *For the Glory of God* by Rodney Stark, *J. Creation* 18(2):49–52, 2004.
8. Zimmermann, A., The Christian foundations of the rule of law in the West: a legacy of liberty and resistance against tyranny, *J. Creation* 19(2):67–73, 2005; creation.com/christianlaw.