Orthodox on God; ambivalent on biblical literalism; bypassing science; socially conservative

Genesis: God, Creation, and destruction

Dennis Prager

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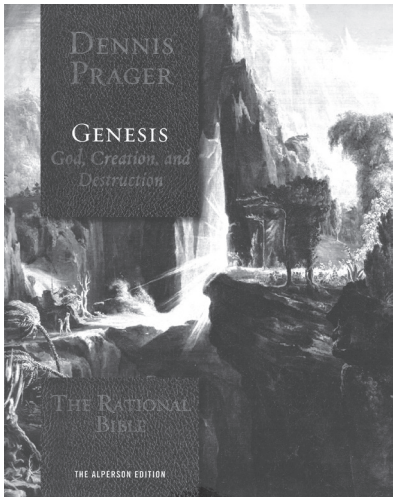

Author Dennis Prager is an American Jew, conservative talk show host, and author. Today he is probably best known as the founder of Prager University, which produces lots of short conservative videos featuring many different experts, and has been the victim of leftist censorship by YouTube. He has written a voluminous commentary on the Book of Genesis, which he has studied for decades. It is a sequel to his commentary on Exodus. I can only focus on a few issues here.

The nature of God

Most of Prager's statements about God in Genesis 1 align with those of a Christian creationist. Thus, Dennis Prager affirms the fact of a Creator, God as a First Cause, a pre-existing (non-created) God, a creation out of nothing, a beginning to the physical universe, a Creator who is separate from nature, and a God of all people (and not just one tribe or nation). His assertion that God is separate from nature is in clear contrast with the pagan accounts, in which the gods are of nature or part of nature. The fact that God is not part of nature means that there is a reality beyond nature. He also asserts that God is not a sexual being (all the pagan gods were sexual). Neither, he says, are the sun, moon, nor sea monsters deities, since they themselves were created by God.

The nature of human beings

The Genesis account teaches that there is a universal morality, and that 'good' and 'evil' are objective entities, not social constructs. Might is not right. Humans and animals have a soul (*nephesh*), but only humans are created in the image and likeness of God, and so have the capacity for holiness. Humans have unprecedented selfworth and have free will. There is an ultimate meaning to existence.

A minimal interaction with science

The author treats the claims of Genesis as an end in themselves, and

does little, beyond the superficial, to relate Genesis to science. However, he cites the work of Intelligent Design advocate Douglas Axe (p. 549). He also mentions the works of compromising evangelical Hugh Ross several times (pp. xxxi, pp. 16–18, 81, 550), but does not generally elaborate on them.

Prager repeats the clichés in which the Bible is not a book of science, where science is ever changing, where the Bible was written to be understandable, and where the Bible is basically a book of moral stories. His attitude can be summarized as follows:

> "In other words, what is important here, as in all the stories of Genesis—from Creation to the Garden of Eden to the ages listed before the Flood and on to the patriarchs and Joseph—is what moral lessons are to be learned and what God wants from us. This does not answer the scientific challenge to people living hundreds of years. But, as pointed out in the Creation story, the Torah was not written to teach science. It was written to teach wisdom and how to live according to the will of a moral God" (p. 82).

How does Prager know this? All this raises a more basic question. Is the *only* information in Genesis 1 that of God being the Creator, and nothing more (figure 1)?

Now consider the Garden of Eden. Prager realizes that God surely could have created a serpent that could talk. However, he cites his teacher, Orthodox Rabbi Amnon Haramati, and the well-regarded Orthodox Rabbi Moshe Shamah, both of whom regarded the Garden of Eden as parabolic. In addition, Prager rejects the 'Christian interpretation' of the serpent being Satan. Here, again, he becomes selectively literal, citing the fact that the serpent is described as an animal—the 'Christian interpretation' does not insist that the serpent being Satan prevents the serpent from also being an animal. In the end, the Garden of Eden becomes another moral story—one about the dangers of humans spurning God's commandments and effectively becoming gods themselves by forming their own concepts of right and wrong.

Prager's attitude to the Noachian Deluge is very similar. He comments:

> "This is a good place to explain the importance of the Torah even if one doesn't believe all the stories in it. Whether there was an enormous flood that destroyed much or nearly all humanity cannot be proven. I believe there was such a flood because I believe the Torah stories and because virtually every culture in the world has a flood story. But what matters more than whether there was a great flood are the lessons one derives from the story. That the Torah was alone in making the Flood story entirely a moral story is what matters. And it is, therefore, one of the many reasons I believe the Torah is divine in origin: mere mortals would not have made it up. No mortals anywhere else did" (p. 94).

Prager similarly confesses a disinterest about the nature of the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (p. 230). Again, what matters to him are the moral lessons taught.

Figure 1. Is God the Creator the *only* information that can legitimately be derived from Genesis 1?

No disrespect to creationists

Although Prager accepts 'science' as usually defined, he does not scorn creationists. He writes:

> "I will explain why 'day' in the Hebrew Bible does not necessarily mean a twenty-four-hour period, but I do not disparage those who believe it means a twenty-four-hour period. Despite their rejection of science regarding creation, these people should not be dismissed as 'anti-science'. I know some of these people, and they are highly respectful of science; some of them study science (and all of them go to doctors). People who truly reject science would forego modern medicine. I know no one who does" (p. 19).

Internal inconsistency on literalness

Christian compromising evangelicals have tried to 'harmonize' Scripture and science through such devices as the Day-Age Theory and the Gap Theory. Prager does not bother with any of this. He effectively waves a magic wand and pronounces that such-and-such is literal, and such-and-such is not. That suffices for him.

Prager frankly takes a pick-and-choose attitude towards Scripture. He wants the attributes of God, taught by Genesis 1 and elaborated on in the introductory part of this review, to be literal, but not the actual events of Genesis 1. On what basis? He follows this train of thought throughout his book. He wants the moral lessons of the Bible accounts to be literal, but not the accounts themselves. Again, on what basis? If the accounts are not factual, then what is there to prevent the moral teachings from being non-factual?

In an effort to find a 'reconciliation' with science, Prager is open to the days in Genesis 1 being non-literal, and he falls back on Psalm 90:4. But, even in the Jewish Bible he uses, it states: "A thousand years in your sight are *like* a day that has just gone by, or *like* a watch in the night [emphasis added]." Clearly, this is in reference to how God experiences time. It states that the thousand years is *like* a day to God; it does not state that the thousand years *is* a day to God.

Prager understands the evening that starts each day in Genesis, and in everyday Hebrew usage, literally, but not in the seven days of Genesis 1. In other words, the evening that starts each day in the calendar is obviously literal, but the evening that starts each day in Genesis 1 is not. Again, he picks and chooses. This has additional practical implications. The weekly observed Sabbath day, very much a part of Orthodox Jewish life, is obviously a literal 24-hour day. But the seventh day of Genesis, when God rested, and which the Sabbath day commemorates, is not. How strange. Prager's reasoning is consistently inconsistent.

Interestingly, Prager notes that Genesis 1 puts human beings as the last of the creation (p. 7). This detail he finds significant, as it agrees with the 'scientific' (read 'evolutionary') worldview, and so he takes it literally. But he is inconsistent in that, while taking the *order* of creation events in Genesis literally, at least this one time, he does not take the events themselves literally. On what basis? In saying that the late appearance of humanity is factual, he is now saying that 'the Bible is a book of science', while elsewhere he affirms that 'the Bible is not a book of science'. He cannot have it both ways!

Finally, Dennis Prager does not answer how one can build a compelling moral story, let alone a divine moral story, about something that did not happen. And if mere mortals can make up a story of a global flood, why can they not also make up the moral significance of that flood? How do the moral teachings of the Flood become factual at the same time that the Flood itself is not factual?

The Bible can teach science

Prager briefly departs from his 'Bible is not a book of science' meme as he describes Rachel's delay in conceiving (pp. 357–360). Reuben had brought mandrake plants, and Rachel asked for them (Genesis 30:14). Now, the mandrake, according to popular superstition, has the power to induce pregnancy, and Rachel evidently believes it. Rachel finally gets pregnant and gives birth to Joseph. However, Prager reminds us of God's statement that He, and not the mandrakes, had enabled Rachel to get pregnant (Genesis 30:25).

The JEPD hypothesis

The author does not specify if he believes that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. He notes that use of different names for God does not necessarily imply different documents; *Adonai* emphasizes the mercy of God while *Elohim* emphasizes the justice of God (p. 32). Nevertheless, he is open to the possibility that the apparent contradictions in the Book of Genesis were caused by separately written traditions that had been fused together, by a redactor, centuries after they had first been written (p. 102). However, he realizes that apparent contradictions in the text can be reconciled while affirming a single source (p. 428). In fact, he cites Robert Alter, a secular scholar, who considers the JEPD 'obtuse' in attributing to duplication the apparent contradictions that actually exist in order to highlight the dramatic and psychological situation in the text (p. 564).

Why God is portrayed as male

Since God is personal, portraying God as neutral or genderless is not possible, according to Prager. The choice of male is deliberate. The male is more rule-oriented than the female. Prager notes that children who grow up without a father are many times more likely to be in poverty and to be involved in crime (p. 10). A study of female inmates (p. 11) shows that more than half come from a fatherless home.

How does this relate to God? Prager explains:

> "In other words, if one's primary goal is a good world—specifically a world with far less murder, child abuse, theft, rape, and torture—a God depicted in masculine terms (a father in Heaven), not a goddess (a mother in Heaven), must be the source of moral and ethical commandments such as 'Do not murder' and 'Do not steal'" (p. 11).

Prager concludes: "We have too many absent fathers on Earth to even entertain the thought of having no Father in Heaven" (p. 12).

Of course, God also has a feminine side. However, the use of *El Shaddai* (Genesis 17:1), as sometimes claimed, is not an allusion to it. Rather than being related to *shaddayim* (breasts), the word *Shaddai* alludes to *sheh-dai*, meaning "it is enough/sufficient", so God (El) is the Sufficient One (p. 193). Several other interpretations are possible (p. 556).

The specifically Jewish view of God

The very name 'Israel' means 'struggle with God' (Genesis 32:29). Prager adds: "I am often surprised by how many Christians—many of whom know the Old Testament better than many religious Jews—do not know that 'Israel' means 'struggle with God'" (p. 390). The 'struggling with God' contrasts with Islam, which means 'submit to God'.

Prager is even-handed. He enjoins the atheist to struggle with his unbelief as much as the believer struggles with his belief. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, he suspects that Jews and Christians struggle with faith more than atheists struggle with their unbelief (p. 389).

The 'struggling with God' occurs when one goes through tragedies. It can also involve everyday situations. For instance, Prager comments:

> "The view of God as provider can lead to problems—to regarding God as a sort of 'celestial butler', a heavenly being whose purpose is to provide for us whenever we need something. This is not only unsophisticated; it can be dangerous to one's faith. If God's primary role is to do things for us, what happens when He doesn't? People may stop believing in Him. If the Provider stops providing, maybe there is no Provider" (p. 411).

In the end, Prague is rather vague on the whole subject of 'struggling with God'. He does not answer this question: when does 'struggling with God' cross the line into just plain grumbling?

The traditional Jewish belief in life after death

Judaism does not stress the afterlife as much as does Christianity, but this does not mean that belief in an afterlife is absent. With reference to Genesis 25:8, Prager comments:

> "The idiomatic expression, 'gathered to his kin', is also used to describe the deaths of Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Aaron, and Moses. The phrase strongly suggests the person has joined his/her kin in the afterlife. No other meaning of the phrase makes sense. It cannot mean the dead person was buried with his kin—for two reasons. First, the expression 'gathered to his kin' is used even when the person was not buried with his kin … . Nor can the expression simply mean the person died because, as in this verse, the text has already stated the individual has died … . Belief in the afterlife was not, as many scholars contend, a later adoption from Greek or Zoroastrian philosophy" (p. 291).

Man is not basically good

Dennis Prager parts ways with the liberal views of the vast majority of Jews. He rejects the notion that humans are basically good. He sees people as born innocent, but prone to do bad things. He sees the sin of Adam and Eve, not in the Christian way of causing original sin, but rather as people sinning in imitation of the actions of Adam and Eve (p. 61). Prager realizes the fact that the popular 'man is basically good' notion is a product of the Enlightenment.

Children must be told many times, and not just once, to express gratitude to others. Children frequently bully other children. And now for the adults: in history, we have had the Roman Colosseum, the almost-universal institution of slavery, and incessant wars. In the 20th century, we had Nazism, Communism, and the Armenian, Herero, and Hutu genocide.

Commandments are necessary to keep humans in line. The conscience which humans possess, in the absence of explicit commandments, does not make man good. The conscience can easily be manipulated into thinking that it is doing good while doing evil, and the conscience can be dulled through the performance of evil. Finally, the conscience is usually not nearly as powerful as the natural drives of such things as greed, envy, sex, and alcoholism.

Belief in Hell, but not Heaven, improves behaviour

Prager, first of all, demolishes the 'progressive' myth that criminals got that way because of low self-esteem. Just the opposite. Violent criminals have a very strong sense of personal superiority. In fact, few people have higher self-esteem than do violent criminals.

Author Prager cites a large study by Professor Azim Shariff (p. 513). Based on 26 years of data, and consisting of 143,197 people from 67 nations, Shariff found that a nation's rate of belief in Hell predicts lower crime rates. This is even so when other factors are taken into account.

The foregoing extends to non-criminal behaviour. Another study by Shariff found that students were more likely to cheat when they believed in a forgiving God than in a punishing God (p. 513). Shariff is quoted as saying: "It's possible that people who don't believe in the possibility of punishment in the afterlife feel like they can get away with unethical behaviour. There is less of divine deterrent" (p. 513).

Affirming capital punishment for capital crimes

Dennis Prager is one of the relatively few American Jews who support the death penalty. He soundly rejects the notion that there is nothing a person can do to deserve to be put to death. He points to the fact that the vast majority of people whose loved ones had been murdered say their suffering is immeasurably increased by the fact that the murderer is alive and being cared for. He quotes the relatives of a high-profile murder victim: "My family got the death penalty, and you want to give murderers life. That is not justice" (p. 124)

In the Torah, the death penalty is prescribed for various offences, not in order that the sentence be carried out, but to show the seriousness of the sin. In the case of the murderer, however, the Torah treats the death penalty as a fundamental building block of society. It is repeated in all five books of the Pentateuch!

Does the death penalty have a deterrent effect? At least in some cases it does (Deuteronomy 19:20).

The modern view is that sparing the life of the murderer reflects a more morally advanced society than in ages past. Not so. Any lesser penalty means that the taking of a human life is not considered the horrible offence that it is. In fact, this was recognized, long ago, in the Torah. Many ancient cultures allowed blood money to be paid in lieu of the death penalty for the murder, but the Torah forbade it (Numbers 35:31). Nor could a fugitive murderer be given asylum in a city (Deuteronomy 19:11–13), or in the temple (Exodus 21:14).

Prager addresses some Talmudic teachings that discourage the application of the death penalty. He points out that they were written while the Jews were under pagan Rome, during which time large numbers of innocent people were put to death, often with the use of torture.

Conclusion

Prager has written a detailed commentary, on Genesis, that is a curious mixture of theological liberalism and social conservatism. He is internally inconsistent in his understanding of the Bible: he effortlessly (and rather arbitrarily) shifts between accepting and not accepting some aspects of the Bible literally.

The author shows valuable insights that challenge some of the popular socially liberal views that hold sway in Western societies. This especially has to do with human nature.