

Why I Don't Take the New Atheism Seriously, Or Penn Jillette on the Bible



It turns out that I have a lot in common with Penn Jillette. Because I had watched some YouTube videos on science, the YouTube Bots assumed that I would be interested in (and recommended to me) a YouTube channel called "Big Think." Big Think advertises itself as "the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content . . . [W]e help you get smarter, faster. We aim to help you explore the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century, so you can apply them to the questions and challenges in your own life." Sounds impressive. What Big Think actually seems to be is a bunch of videos largely by popular media scientists like Bill Nye (the "Science Guy"), Neil de Grasse Tyson (Nova, Cosmos), Michio Kaku, and "public intellectuals" of the "New Atheist" variety.

If I were to express the underlying logic of many of the videos on Big Think, it would go something like this:

1) We're scientists and we're really smart (or maybe we're not scientists, but we're still really smart, and we think that scientists are smart too).

2) We don't believe in God.

Therefore,

3) If you want to be smart (like a scientist) or at least have

people think you're smart (like those of us who aren't scientists), you won't believe in God either.

Anyway, YouTube recommended a Big Think video in which Penn Jillette (the magician) explained how he became an atheist. As I said, it turns out that Jillette and I have a lot in common. Both of us were raised in "generic" Protestant churches – what he calls the church of the "covered dish supper." (I'm assuming that Jillette's church was generic Liberal Protestant, while mine was generic [very] conservative Evangelical. He was raised Congregationalist; I was raised Southern Baptist.) Both of us were actively involved in high school youth groups connected with our church, and we were both influenced by a "cool" youth group leader. Jillette claims that when he was in high school that he read the Bible "cover to cover." So did I. Jillette claims that he took theological questions "very seriously," and read most of the theology books in his local library. I also took theology "very seriously" and I read a lot of books, although I certainly did not read most of the theology books in my local library.

Here's where the similarities end. Jillette tells his listeners that he made a deal with his parents that he would not have to go to church services if he went to the High School youth group instead. Jillette claims that it was reading the Bible that turned him into an atheist, and that eventually he was asked to leave the youth group because he was using his new-found knowledge to convert other members of the youth group to atheism. Not only did I not leave either my youth group or my church, but for awhile I was the president of the youth group. Far from making me an atheist, reading the Bible became a life-long passion. I continue to read it every day and have read it "cover to cover" numerous times. After high school, I majored in philosophy in college, and later earned both an MA and a PhD in theology. None of this made me an atheist.

So what are the actual arguments that Jillette raises in this video? What about reading the Bible turned him into an atheist?

Jillette states:

1) “Anyone thinking about being an atheist, if you read the Bible or the Koran or the Torah cover to cover, I believe you will emerge from that as an atheist.” “The Bible itself will turn you atheist faster than anything.”

Okay, I’m intrigued.

2) “What we get told about the Bible is a lot of picking and choosing.”

Here’s where I get suspicious.

3) “When you see Lot’s daughter gang-raped and beaten, and the Lord being okay with that.”

Lot had two daughters. Neither was gang-raped or beaten. Quite the contrary; a significant point of the story of Lot is that although the men of Sodom threaten the strangers who are staying with Lot, no one is gang-raped or beaten. Not the strangers, not Lot’s daughters. Later Lot’s daughters do get their father drunk, and seduce him – the narrator clearly disapproves of this – but this is evidence that Jillette did not actually read the Bible cover to cover. He gets the story wrong.

4) “When you actually read about Abraham being willing to kill his son . . .”

This is correct, but at the most, it shows that Jillette has not read the text very carefully. A key part of reading any text is understanding context. From beginning to end, the story of Abraham is the story of God’s promise to provide Abraham a son against overwhelming odds. Abraham and Sarah are too old to have children. Eventually Abraham does have a son,

but the context makes clear that Abraham does not kill his son. And Abraham himself tells Isaac that God will provide a sacrifice, which God does. Moreover, the reader knows that Abraham did not kill his son, because the nation of Israel are descended from Abraham's son. The point of the story is that Abraham has learned to have faith in God – that God can be depended on – something that Abraham consistently fails to do in the early parts of the story. The whole point of the story is that Abraham has finally learned to trust God – and God demonstrates that he is trustworthy because he prevents Abraham from killing his son.

5) “When you read the insanity of the talking snake . . .”

Again, this is proof that Gillette did not read the text very carefully. The story in Genesis 2 is not about the snake, but about temptation. The snake has a “walk-on” part – to provide an occasion of temptation. That later interpreters understood the snake to be a personification of Satan, the “tempter,” make it clear that no one understood “talking snakes” to be a normal everyday reality. (If there is a “talking snake” in Genesis, it's the only one.)

6) When you read the hostility toward homosexuals, toward women . . .”

This shows that Gillette has been influenced by what he has been told is in the Bible rather than actually having read the Bible. The Bible says very little about homosexuality – and, when Gillette was a teenager, few people in the culture would have approved of homosexuality, so it's unlikely that this was the reason he lost his faith. Modern studies like those of Jewish writer Tikva Frymer-Kensky make clear that the Hebrew Bible is not hostile toward women. It also seems clear that Gillette had not read the New Testament – he says nothing about Jesus' relationships to women, especially in the gospel of Luke, or the significant role of women in the book of Acts. Gillette does not seem aware that the first witnesses of

Jesus' resurrection were women. Moreover, the letters of Paul make clear that women had important roles of leadership in his churches. Paul's instructions about family life in the "household codes" in Ephesians and Colossians challenge the sexism of first-century culture by encouraging husbands to love their wives. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that men do not have control over their own bodies, but their wives do.

7) ". . . the celebration of slavery . . ."

Slavery was universally practiced in all ancient cultures. The Bible certainly does not *celebrate* slavery. In ancient Israel, slavery was significantly modified and humanized compared to surrounding cultures. (Old Testament slavery was not life-long; it was closer to indentured servitude for a limited period of time.) More significant, how could Gillette have missed that the foundation story of Israel is the story of the deliverance of a people from slavery? In the New Testament, one begins to see the beginning of the humane attitudes that eventually led to the abolition of slavery. One of the healing stories about Jesus concerns the healing of a slave. The same "household codes" that encourage husbands to love their wives, challenge slave-owners to consider themselves fellow "servants" of their slaves. In Philemen, Paul actually encourages a slave-owner to release his slave.

8) "When you read in context that 'Thou shalt not kill' means only in your own tribe. There's no hint that it means humanity in general – that there's no sense of a shared humanity; it's all tribal."

This is the only time when Gillette gives any indication that he knows what context means, but unfortunately, what he says is so much nonsense. The Old Testament provides special protection for foreigners and "sojourners" (Ex. 22:21, 23:9, Lev. 19:34, Dt. 10:19). There are numerous stories in the Old Testament in which Israel's mission is extended to Gentiles. A major theme of eschatological passages is that the Gentiles

will be included in God's kingdom. Also, Jillette seems painfully oblivious about how he, a Gentile, was attending a Congregational church in Connecticut. A key theme of the New Testament concerns the proclaiming of the gospel to Gentiles. This is a central theme of the book of Acts as well as Paul's epistles. Moreover, although Jesus explicitly restricted his ministry to Gentiles, there are numerous occasions when he healed Gentiles and spoke highly of them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes so far as to tell his followers to "love their enemies," and to "bless those who curse you." Far from "no hint," the mission to the Gentiles is a key theme in the Old Testament, and at the heart of New Testament teaching. And, of course, the context of the very passage that Gillette had referred to earlier – the "insanity of the talking snake" – is the story of the creation of *Adam* (ha'adam in Hebrew, which means "human being") as the progenitor of the entire human race. In Genesis 1, we are told that God created humanity as "male and female" *in his image*, and the entire human race are descended from this original humanity. This is not "tribal" by any stretch of the imagination.

9) "When you see a God that is jealous and insecure. . ."

This is, again, a prime indication that Jillette simply misses the point of context and seems entirely ignorant of the historical setting of the Old Testament. The Old Testament does describe God as "jealous"; it also says a lot of other things about God. At the foundation of Israel's faith is God's covenant with Israel, after having delivered Israel from slavery. The prologue to the Ten Commandments begins, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This prologue provides the context for everything that follows in the Ten Commandments. One of the key terms that is used of God throughout the Old Testament is *hesed*, translated "loving kindness" and "mercy." It is because God has shown love and mercy to Israel by delivering the people from slavery, and by entering into a "covenant" with

the people that a special relationship has been formed. Countless studies have shown the significance of the ancient Middle Eastern understanding of "covenant" for understanding the relationship between God and Israel. In this Middle Eastern covenant concept, God is portrayed as similar to a "liege-lord" who has shown great favor to a lesser partner. In entering a covenant, both parties have obligations. If one party violates the terms of the covenant, there are, of course, consequences.

Moreover, Israel's religion was unique not only in the Middle East, but also in the world, in being monotheistic. If there is only one God, then worship of any other god is not only a violation of the covenant, but also a case of self-delusion. One of the central themes of the Old Testament has to do with the foolishness and delusional character of idolatry. The New Atheists seem to think they show originality in their contempt for what they consider the false god of Christianity. They are fairly late on the scene. Nothing the New Atheists write can compare to the sarcasm of Elijah's words to the prophets of Baal, or Deutero-Isaiah's dismissal of idolatry. But this dismissal of idolatry occurs in the immediate context of Isaiah's proclamation of the oneness of God and uniqueness of God: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god." (Is 44:6)

It is the combination of this covenant partnership (based on God's favor and mercy toward Israel), combined with radical monotheism, that provides the occasion of God's "jealousy." God is not "jealous" because he is insecure, but because he, and he alone is God, and he, and he alone, can provide for Israel's security. Idolatry is foolishness. (Ex. 34:6,14); it is believing a lie.

In the New Testament, it is the notion of "grace" (*charis*) or "love" (*agape*) that becomes the equivalent of the Old Testament notion of *hesed* (mercy or loving-kindness"), which is now located in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, "God shows his

love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). And it is because God is good to all without measure, that Jesus commands his followers to love even their enemies (Matt. 7:43-48).

If Jillette really had read the Bible "cover to cover," he would have known this. Or at least, he should have.

10) "When you see that there's contradictions that show that it was clearly written hundreds of years after the supposed fact, and full of contradictions . . ."

Jillette presumes to be a biblical scholar here, but he does not say what the contradictions are, or which parts of the Bible were written "hundreds of years after the supposed fact." Is he talking about the New Testament? No biblical scholar believes that the gospels were written "hundreds of years after the supposed fact." Paul's letters were written within a few decades of the facts; the scholarly consensus is that the gospels were written some time between 65 and 95 AD, well within the life-time of eyewitnesses. Much of the Old Testament also gives indication of being written by eyewitnesses – the court story of David; the writings of the major and minor prophets – even though they may contain later material as well.

Jillette seems to be thinking of the Torah here – about which there is disagreement among biblical scholars. Very conservative biblical scholars would argue for the Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch; very liberal scholars would say that none of it goes back to Moses. A great many scholars would land somewhere in between. The Torah is a composite work, with some parts coming from a much later period, e.g., the book of Deuteronomy, and many of the laws. At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that the book has a substantial historical core, and contains substantial ancient material, much of which may go back to Moses himself. At the same time, unless one assumes a "fundamentalist" notion

of biblical authorship, that the Torah was written over a period of time does not detract from either the historical reliability or the theological significance of the text. It is the final canonical form that is Scripture, whenever it was finally written.

11) "It's like reading the Constitution. It's in English. You don't need someone to hold your hand. . . . Read what the Bible says. Going back to the source material is always the best. Someone's trying to interpret something for you, they always have an agenda."

Well, no. The Bible is not in English. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. What we have in English are translations. I do agree, however, that reading the text itself is the best approach, even in English translation. But it seems that Jillette could have profited from having someone "hold his hand," since his understanding of the Bible seems so deficient that he clearly did not read it carefully. Much has been written on the Bible. Universities and seminaries are full of professors who have PhD's in Old and New Testament. If Jillette had read any competent commentaries or introductions to the Old or New Testament in addition to reading the Bible, he would not have made such egregious errors.

12) "I read the Bible, and then I read Bertrand Russell, and I read a lot of other stuff. . . . I read a lot of 'em" [theology in the local library]. I was asked to leave the youth group because I was converting everyone to atheism."

I also read Betrand Russell, and Plato and Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Sartre, Camus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, George MacDonald, Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Walther Eichrodt, Oscar Cullmann, Joachim Jeremias.

I was not asked to leave because I was converting everyone to atheism. I became the president of the youth group.

13) "With the help of Martin Mull, Randy Newman, Frank Zappa – the idea that these three men were out of the closet atheists, was so inspiring to me. . . . Having those people say the simple words, 'There is no God' meant the world to me, and gave me joy and gave me passion, and gave me love and gave me confidence."

Martin Mull? Randy Newman? Frank Zappa? Really? I remember the first time I read Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Pannenberg. Was it like that?

14) "I'm on the side that's winning. . . . If you counted atheism as a religion, it's the fastest growing religion in America."

This is a classic example of *Argumentum ad populum*, or the "bandwagon" fallacy. (If you're a *really smart* "New Atheist," you can look it up on Wikipedia.)

Finally, and most important – in typical "New Atheist" fashion, Jillette claims to be criticizing "religion" in general. However, the single religion Jillette is really criticizing (as are all the "New Atheists") is historical orthodox Christianity. He begins by talking about his own upbringing as a Protestant Christian, and how he lost his Christian faith. Although he begins by talking about "the Bible, the Koran, and the Torah," he then states that "reading the Bible will turn you atheist faster than anything." (Oddly, he does not seem to recognize that "the Torah" is actually part of "the Bible." The Koran is not.) The rest of his talk is a criticism of "the Bible," by which presumably he means the Christian Bible, which he claims to have read "from cover to cover" when he was in High School. Despite this claim, Jillette's criticisms are all addressed to the book of Genesis, with a single reference to the Ten Commandments. At

this point, Jillette's "cover to cover" claim begins to sound very suspicious. Most puzzling in Jillette's argument is his complete omission of any reference to the New Testament whatsoever. He neither acknowledges nor even addresses the fundamental claim of New Testament and Christian religion, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God incarnate, who died on a Roman cross and rose from the dead three days later. If a "talking snake" is "insanity," what are we to make of a crucified God who rises from the dead? Jillette's criticism of the Bible is something like the film critic who claims the latest movie is "terrible," but it turns out that he walked out of the theater during the opening titles.

Is it fair to pick on Penn Jillette, a celebrity magician not known for his expertise in biblical studies, theology or philosophy? If a YouTube channel calls itself "Big Think," and advertises itself as "the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content," and that YouTube channel presents Penn Jillette as an example of "the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century," then "yes." I'll take "New Atheism" seriously when it takes itself seriously enough to present serious arguments.