

A Theory of Exegesis

July 1, 2011 Category: Religion
Download as PDF

“The separation of the ‘spirit of the Bible’ from the ‘letter of the Bible’ is an irreligious act.”

–Karl Marx (*On The Jewish Question*)

EXEGESIS OF SACRED TEXTS:

A Critique of The Christian Modus Operandi

INTRO:

What follows is a critique of the manner in which many people interpret texts they deem sacred. The essay primarily pertains to the dysfunctional way in which LITERALISTS view / treat their holy books—and to the exegesis of Christian fundamentalists especially. It does not address other modes of exegesis, such as those used by people who treat the texts as metaphors / parables, in which the reader BRINGS his own understanding / insights (gleaned independently the text) TO the text.

I concentrate primarily on fundamentalist / evangelical Christianity’s exegetical shenanigans because that is what I am qualified to address. The essay may have some relevance to literalist treatments of the Koran / Torah, but it doesn’t pertain to them directly. (Regarding Talmudic / Kabbalistic treatments of Jewish texts, I’m simply not adequately knowledgeable on Jewish exegeses to engage in an honest, informed critique. I am only qualified to do so for literalist treatments found in Christianity.)

For non-literalist treatments of sacred texts, some of the points made in the present essay may still have relevance (e.g. the emphasis / de-emphasis game). The bottom line: If one is required to *bring* one’s understanding of the world (e.g. the moral insights one has gleaned by one’s own devices) *to the text* (in order to make sense of the text), then one has the requisite wisdom prior to (and thus independently of) the text...thus rendering the text largely superfluous. Here, the text is used merely as a pedagogic tool—not the ultimate source of insight. With such a treatment, the text is an inspiration, not a source of raw information—a book a Faith, not of data. With such a reading, the text’s value is more aesthetic than discursive. It is read as a work of art, not as a technical instruction manual. A community reading a particular text together is valued insofar as it offers a shared experience—not because that text is THE “right one”.

Jefferson’s view of the New Testament is a case in point. Of the text, he says:

“And the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter. But may we hope that the dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States will do away with this artificial scaffolding, and restore to us the primitive and genuine doctrines of this most venerated reformer of human errors.”

Meanwhile, most bona fide scholars of ancient texts hold the simple view that anyone who takes everything in the text literally is—to be blunt—an idiot. This is not far off the mark. Indeed, in order to reconcile the endless despicable and reprehensible passages in the Pentateuch with anything that even

remotely resembles a sane moral system, one must engage in stupendous feats of cognitive dissonance. That is, one is required to undergo chronic mental contortions in order to square the preposterous edicts found in the Old Testament with even the most elementary ethical standards. To not recognize this is to succumb to delusion.

Most mentally stable, reasonable people have acknowledged this, come to terms with it, and thus don't take ancient texts too seriously. They refrain from making the texts into something that they're clearly not. Meanwhile, they recognize that the few tid-bits that do happen to have moral credence are matters of common sense—insights that any reasonable human being can glean *by his own devices*.

Most “liberal” religionists view their sacred books in this way, which entails treating the text as “optional” (i.e. one of many possible illustrative vehicles that a person may choose in an effort to “make sense out of” life). Such a choice, in these cases, is based more on tradition (i.e. shared heritage) than on “picking the right source”. Such a treatment means that all religion is man-made, and that—all other things being equal—one religion is just as valid as another. In such a scenario, the criticisms in the present essay don't apply.

The question of grounding morality in a non-dogmatic system is an issue for another essay. Yet we should keep in mind that a science of justice / fairness (as opposed to conformity to social norms, compliance with prescribed rules or obedience to authority) and a science of *objective* well-being (a/o/t maximizations of personal satisfaction / gratification / happiness) can *and does* exist—and does not rest on the interpretation of any particular source.

The problems addressed here, then, are encountered primarily when one engages in a literalist (or quasi-literalist) reading of a sacred text.

THESIS:

Our point of departure issues from two axioms.

First:

Serious exposition intended to convey decisive points on important matters is not written as poetry / metaphor. In serious exposition, people say exactly what they mean, and they mean exactly what they say. There need be no veiling of the message in mysterious-sounding, mystique-enshrouded prose. Vague gist, idiom, metaphor and abstract symbolism are artistic devices employed to convey a general sense of things, yet leave the text open to myriad interpretation. Invariably, such interpretation is more a reflection of those doing the interpreting than the so-called “intent” of the author. Upon interpretation, when more is revealed about the reader than the author, we can be fairly certain that we're dealing with—at best—artistic expression. At worst: it is chicanery disguised as profound discourse.

Second:

With both the Old and New Testaments in Christianity, the Torah (as well as Talmudic and Kabbalistic writings) in Judaism, or the Koran and Haddith in Islam, any sane person recognizes that certain passages are “choice” passages while others are best left disregarded. (Short of the fanatics, every devout adherent to any of the Abrahamic religions knows this is true, whether he admits it or not.) The examples are endless in each case.

ANALYSIS:

In order to judiciously pick out isolated pearls of wisdom *from* a text (while discarding the balderdash), one must have some sort of capacity for *moral discernment*

that exists *independently* of that text. In other words, the necessary judgment OF the text can't be BASED ON that text—lest a catch-22 ensue. The conclusion of this is quite straightforward: One must already possess the faculties necessary to “make the text work” as an articulation / validation / affirmation of those faculties...thus rendering the text—at best—superfluous.

If we're even marginally clever and afford ourselves enough artistic license, we can “read into” a sufficiently flowery-worded passage whatever we desire. This is the “magic” of ancient / mystical verbiage: it can be made to convey whatever one sees fit. Therefore, to claim such a text as THE ULTIMATE source of wisdom while resorting to such exegetical maneuvers is to try to have one's cake and eat it too. (An ultimate source must offer the conditions by which it may be cogent.) It is either the ultimate source OR I'm required to bring my understanding to the text in order to make proper sense of it. One can't have it both ways.

Yet apologists for fundamentalist religion insist on getting away with this flagrant inconsistency: requiring themselves to NOT need the text in order to make the case that they NEED the text. The paradox is lost on credulous followers, eager to swallow the enticing sales-pitch fed to them. They need only just “believe”, and all the work is done for them.

Alas, short of mindless obedience, in order to “get” the text to “work”, one is forced to avail oneself of resources that can't derive from the text—thereby (inadvertently) demonstrating that the essential capacities for prudent judgment never required the text in the first place. Hence the retro-active entreaty: “Just believe.” Faith, it seems, is not only a jerry-rigged rationalization, it is an ex post facto Novocain dosage for cognitive dissonance.

Background:

The common gimmick of the ‘prophet’, the ‘oracle’, the soothsayer, the inspirational guru, the charismatic leader, the remote-viewer, and the clairvoyant ‘seer’ involves a dose *duende* coupled with dash of *strategic vagueness*. The stunt is quite easy to pull off: Leave the prophecy open to a wide range of interpretation so that, later on, actual events may be readily retro-fitted to it. This is the oldest trick in the book, yet—astoundingly—it continues to dupe millions of people hungry for hope and the illusion of certainty and coherence.

The trick is simply a matter of allowing for a variety of different futures to be interpretable as the fulfillment of the designated prophecy. By doing this, certain key parts can be emphasized as needed, others strategically de-emphasized—and any coincidence passed off as some miraculous case of divine design. These pre-rigged idioms are ripe for post hoc re-casting.

This is a handy trick. SEEMING coincidences may be appropriated in order to lend *claims of Providence* a veneer of credence. The ersatz prescience is then construed as wisdom—some kind of magical knack for profound insight, making the practitioner appear uniquely special (and thus worth listening to). This illusion imbues him with profundity, and confers upon him power—no matter how specious the grounds.

When prose is hyper-idiomatic, how literally or metaphorically any given statement is to be treated can be tweaked according to one's needs. The hoped-for meaning is readily projected onto (mapped to) the extant text. Adjustments to the exegesis may be made to customize the text to the desired meaning, according to one's interests du jour.

For these reasons, any sacred text composed poetically is categorically suspect. It can't be treated as serious exposition. Rarely can it be taken to mean literally what it says. There is no “face value”, as one is expected to “read into” the wording what one is EXPECTED to read into it—believing it was there all along. (It is a basic tenet of social psychology that the most efficient way to dominate and exploit people is

to convince them of things that will have them embrace that domination / exploitation as a blessing. The best way to control people is to convince them that they're not being controlled, but empowered—that their subjugation is really a mesmerizing kind of emancipation.)

As a point of contrast, most Hindus recognize Hindu folklore (like the Vedas, the Mahabharata, or the Upanishads) AS FOLKLORE—and treat it accordingly (i.e. prudently). They are idioms by which to make sense of the world, parables that illustrate a point, metaphors for conveying a message, etc. They provide a shared heritage, and thus a shared (spiritual / devotional) experience—and thus a common reference point. They typically see the texts for what they actually are, and generally don't try to make them something that they're not. Thus, they tend not to encounter the problems enumerated below. (The same may be said for most Buddhists' treatment of the story of Siddhartha.)

The Diagnosis:

There are 3 standard tactics in literalist exegesis—tactics employed by desperate religionist apologists as a last resort for salvaging a hopelessly derelict text. These are the games apologists tend to play:

1) “The Context Game”

The Claim: We must look at the text in the context of our own insights—interpret it according to our current understanding of how things are. We must BRING TO the text our current perspective, and use our own judgment to inform how the text should be interpreted (and thus determine what it's “SUPPOSED TO” mean).

This is based on the recognition that the text was written in the idiom of the time, and is thus “dated”. It is couched in terms that resonated with people at the time, according to their understanding at the time, limited to their knowledge at the time, to address the concerns at the time. In other words, the wording is a reflection of the circumstances that gave rise to the text. This must be somehow “mapped” to the idiom of our own time—cast in terms that make sense to us here in the 21st century, given all the new knowledge we have accumulated, given the significant developments in the intervening time, and the new insights we've gleaned. This “mapping” from an antiquated idiom to a contemporary idiom is a tricky task, as one is compelled to preserve the tradition whilst tampering with it. To adjust the wording accordingly, without undermining a coveted tradition, requires a tight-rope walk: maintaining the sanctity of the text while at the same time “updating” it to reflect current wisdom.

2) “The Metaphor Game”

The Claim: It's just a metaphor. It was never meant to be taken literally.

3) “The Cherry-picking Game”

The Claim: THIS part matters; not so much those other parts. (This is a game of coy selectivity to suit one's purposes: a strategic gambit of emphasis / de-emphasis.)

These shenanigans provide retro-active damage-control. They serve as post hoc, ad hoc rationalizations. The appropriate response to them is: “If that's what they ‘really’ meant, then why didn't they just say it?” Generally, what the writers (allegedly) ‘really’ meant would have been far easier—and much simpler—to say. So why didn't they just cut to the chase and spit it out? If this were any other author of ostensibly serious exposition, we'd upbraid him for playing such games. “But I just wanted to sound mysterious and enchanting” would not be an acceptable excuse.

Why all the vagueness and mystical-sounding verbiage? Often, we find, the IMPORTED meaning (the one the apologist insists is between the lines) is quite straight-forward. So, one must wonder: *What the heck was the big problem?*

Moreover, those crucial insights that are suspiciously lacking, when now quite obvious, were equally easy and straight-forward. Slavery is wrong. ALL humans are entitled to basic dignity and prerogative. It's NOT moral to kill a person for picking up sticks on a certain day of the week. Why the omission of such simple truths? Why are humanitarian values, civil/human rights, etc. peculiarly absent from the Old and New Testaments (and, for that matter, the Koran) when, for a divine mind, they would have ALWAYS been staggeringly obvious? Why the Byzantine semantics when, *all along*, such messages were stupendously easy to convey? These are such elementary points, and points so easy to make, one would think a divine mind would have not beat around the bush, and just spelled it out—thus saving human society millennia of needless suffering, violence, ignorance, and death. Did God have the Inquisition in mind? Did Jesus have the Vatican in mind? Obviously not. But the phraseology left room for such preposterous interpretations. A divine mind would have foreseen this, and forestalled such horrific developments with an iota of straight-talk.

That the average 7-year-old has more moral sense than the entire Pentateuch, and has a better understanding of the world than found in the pages of the Koran, the Torah, and the New Testament COMBINED, should illustrate this point.

Any reasonable person can endorse the following:

As a general rule of thumb, when something is extremely important and very meaningful, any serious person who discusses it will take special care to say exactly what he means, mean precisely what he says. In serious discourse, people are careful say EVERYTHING they actually want to say, and say NOTHING they don't really want to say.

PROGNOSIS:

Game 1 doesn't work, because it renders the existence of the text obsolete. If one needs to use his own judgment to "read into" the text in order to determine what it's supposed to mean, then the role of the text is rendered utterly superfluous (beyond being merely the object of recreational analysis). By resorting to "The Context Game", one is force-fitting that which one has to figure out for oneself anyway INTO the text.

The reader must pull this stunt in order to justify the wording that ACTUALLY EXISTS in the text. Consequently, the text's existence becomes gratuitous. Interpreting it becomes a game: creatively using one's own judgment, independently of the text, FIRST...and then mapping it onto the text in an attempt to FIND (extract, create, project) the desired meaning. If the insight that validates the text's *raison d'être* is a PREREQUISITE for understanding the text, then there's a fatal catch-22.

Game 2 doesn't work simply because it creates a fatal slippery slope. Once we indulge in this rationalization for ONE thing in the text, it becomes immediately indeterminate where, exactly to draw the line. The predicament arises: Where does the metaphorical language end and the literal language begin? Of course, this question promptly becomes unanswerable.

One of the hallmark features of superstition is that they involve metaphors that don't admit that they are metaphors. Or: People employing a metaphor, and forgetting (not realizing) that it's a METAPHOR. Sacred texts are often written poetically, yet then demand to be taken literally...*or vice versa*. When they NEED to be a metaphor, they don't admit that they're employing metaphor. Yet when they demand to be taken literally, they fail to specify the demarcation between metaphor and literal. The credence of the entire work is thus undermined. It forfeits its worthiness to be taken seriously. The discernment (informed judgment) we're told we're required to bring to the text IN ORDER TO ASCERTAIN THIS

DEMARCATIION renders the text moot.

One can easily ask of a particular part that the apologist DOESN'T insist is a metaphor: "Well, if THAT part OVER THERE is a metaphor, as you say...then who's to say that THIS part HERE isn't a metaphor TOO?" The apologist will be forced to have recourse to criteria outside of the text, thus undermining his own cause. He will base his distinction on something that, by definition, exists independently of the text.

Game 3 is the oldest trick in the book. It doesn't work for obvious reasons. An ad hoc editing of the material to suit one's desired purpose renders the entire text a grab-bag of handy excerpts—tidbits to be conveniently cited in order to suit one's agenda. In this dubious scheme, emphasis and de-emphasis are custom tailored to a pre-determined outcome.

Playing this game renders WHATEVER the text happens to say utterly moot. Yet religionists continue to fetishize the citing of key scriptural passages...as if that itself were some sort of validation of their point. All this game accomplishes is revealing what parts the APOLOGIST finds most useful for his purposes—what citations may be exploited polemic. By importing his own meaning into the isolated passage, the sophist appears as though he's made a profound point with divine validation.

CONCLUSION:

Often, sacred texts are couched in mysterious-sounding verbiage. This renders any exegesis intriguing, fun, fascinating and enchanting. Meanwhile, it also distracts from the text's vacuousness. By imbuing it with the veneer of mystical profundity, many fail to notice that—once one gets past the stigma of the particular semantics—the words only amount to a litany of banal balderdash. Candy-coated flapdoodle. Phrasing that boasts an ersatz substance that may be appropriated as the interpreter sees fit.

Unlike mere poetry, if serious expository writing is to be taken seriously, *it must be taken literally* y...unless the author explicitly stipulates that the work is meant to be an allegory / parable / metaphor or understands this to be self-explanatory (Nietzsche's TSZ and Kierkegaard's fiction are wonderful examples of this exception). If the point of a text is beauty, its virtue primarily artistic, we are dealing with LITERATURE, and should be treating the text as provocative ART, poignantly expressing ideas and impressions—NOT as expository writing.

Too often we become enraptured by the mysterious-ness of writing, and lose sight of this basic, common-sense distinction.

We are enthralled by the prospect of coded or secret messages. It's FUN. We LIKE cryptic writings. We enjoy compelling narratives for the same reason we enjoy eerily-realistic ghost stories, captivating tales of the amazing, and hearing provocative conspiracy theories. We like to be spooked, enchanted, instilled with awe and wonder. We're intoxicated by such things, even when it's complete hogwash—and it usually IS hogwash. We don't care that Nostradamus and Revelations are not just bullshit, but OBVIOUS bullshit.

We're captivated by it ANYWAY. It strikes a cord, it sends a chill; and so we hunger for more. It resonates with us because it hits a nerve.

But some people take it all a tad TOO seriously. So much so that, at some point, they lose track of the fact that it's all a bunch of captivating silliness. Before we know it, our credulity kicks in, and we sink into a quagmire of hyper-dogmatism.

A FURTHER ILLUSTRATION:

Most of us have the capacity to discern between an allegory with a noble message and a literal historical account. Each plays its own role in one's edification. But to treat one as the other creates grave problems. To know the difference is to make the crucial distinction between a pedagogic device and a fact of history. Both offer value, but in different ways.

Apologists for literalist exegeses engage in sophistry-gone-haywire. A sample of such out-of-control rationalizations follows. Here is the form a typical debate takes between a literalist (A)pologist of some sacred text and a skeptical (I)nterlocutor:

I: Look at this. It says X here.

A: Ya-ya-ya, but it really MEANS Y.

I: But it SAYS X.

A: But it means Y.

I: But it says...X.

A: But that's not what it really MEANS.

I: Okay, fine. How about this here? They wrote Z.

A: But that's not what those who wrote it REALLY meant.

I: But that's what they SAID.

A: But it's not really what they MEANT.

I: But that's what they WROTE.

A: But that's not what they were *really* getting at. They were just trying to say Y, but they put it another way.

I: But that's not what they actually SAID. They wrote Z.

A: Ya, ya. But Y is what they really MEANT.

I: But it doesn't actually SAY that. It says THIS. Why didn't they just say Y, if THAT is what they were "really" trying to say?

A: It's not that simple. It wasn't so straight-forward back then...in those days.

I: If Y was the real message behind the words, they could have easily just SAID it. X is no easier to say than Y. It's not like Y is tricky to articulate.

A: Yes, but...

...And on and on and on...ad nauseum. This is the general form that the typical back-and-forth takes between two such parties. Most debates about interpretation are variations of this. (Most discussions about exegesis can be distilled to these terms.)

Sometimes, the dialogue can become slightly more nuanced, involving the standard tactics employed by apologists (the 3 “games” discussed above):

A: Well, look. You need to use your own judgment. When reading the text, you have to use your own life experience as your guide, and “bring to” the text your own understanding of things...in order for it to “work”.

I: In order for it to “work”?

A: Of course! You need to read it in the context of the rest of our understanding of things.

I: Okay. Fine. Fair enough. But if I have to figure things out on my own anyway, before I can “properly interpret” the text, then doesn’t that render the text moot?

A: Moot?

I: Sure. If I’m forced to employ my own reasoning **IN THE FIRST PLACE** in order to cull the **REAL** meaning from “between the lines”, then it seems the role of the text becomes superfluous. I already had the requisite understanding in hand prior to embarking on my exegetical escapade. So why bother finagling that insight from the semantics found in the text?

A: But the text is still **USEFUL**. It’s inspiring and poignant. And it’s a good pedagogic device. It serves as an illustrative tool for those who may need help grasping key points.

I: So the narrative serves as a didactic vehicle.

A: Yes.

I: But if you need to import **INTO** the text your understanding of things independently of the text, then why bother? If you’re simply going to project **ONTO** the text judgments that you need to figure out on your own anyway...then why bother with playing the game of interpreting it to begin with? You’re just using it as a parable. Aside from the pure recreation and intrigue of doing this, the text is merely an optional mental prosthetic.

A: But the text helps confirm our understanding by giving them a powerful voice. It provides something we can all refer to and share. It affirms our innate moral sense by giving them a reverent articulation. It validates our intuitions. It conveys coveted ideas by giving them a sacred voice.

I: But does truth need to be sacred in order to have credence? It seems going to the trouble to fit the text to your own understanding—understanding as it exists independently of the text—is gratuitous. You’ve made, as a prerequisite for the text being able to “work” the very thing you need the text to acquire. It’s a catch-22. It’s like needing to get your body to cure itself of a disease **FIRST** before the medicine you claim you need to take **IN ORDER TO** cure it will actually work. If that’s the case, the “medicine” was never actually medicine. It was a placebo, at best.

A: But the texts are inspirational guides.

I: Only when the READER can guide HIMSELF first, apparently.

A: But the text HELPS.

I: Only when the reader has the wherewithal to make the requisite judgments in the first place.

A: But the texts provide useful guidance.

...and on and on. Lastly, arguments pertain to questions of salience: issues of emphasis / de-emphasis. Yet the moment this becomes an issue, the matter can't help but become an orgy of strategic cherry-picking and confirmation bias. Passage-citing becomes a sport. Thus:

A: They tell us Y here.

I: Ya, but over here it says X—which is contrary to the message you claim is REALLY behind it all: Y.

A: But over HERE it DOES say Y.

I: But over there it says X.

A: But over here, it says Y.

I: But over there, it says X.

A: Ya, but over there, where it says X...That's out of context, and not meant to be taken literally. When the text says X, it's idiomatic. It's in a different context.

I: Unlike where it says Y; THAT'S literal. Hmm. How convenient.

A: Where it says X, you're just taking it too literally. If you view it in the modern context of what we NOW understand about things, then it all works itself out in the end. And the underlying message, Y, prevails.

I: So it's literal HERE, but metaphorical over THERE.

A: Yep.

I: Says who?

A: Common sense.

I: Aha.

...And on and on and on it typically goes. Common sense, it seems, is a prerequisite for the "proper" cherry-picking excursion. The upshot is: Of any piece of handy wisdom revealed in the text, the interlocutor could simply ask, "Did ya REALLY need this text to figure that out?"

THE CHARADE OF EXEGESIS: HERMENEUTIC ACROBATICS:

Bringing your understanding of things TO a text in order to make the text “work” is a question-begging charade. The consequence of endorsing this charade is justifying the existence of idiotic passages in sacred books. That is to say, one can use this m.o. to rationalize almost anything one wishes.

We can’t update and edit sacred texts. They are what they are, since they are static artifacts. Being sacrosanct, the most that the devout follower can do with such a text is dicker with it. He can tweak his interpretations here and there, within the confines of some approved mode of exegesis—approved BY the very institution that is based on the text. A catch-22 ensues.

In other words, the boundary conditions of the analysis are set by the very doctrines in question. It’s a self-limiting, self-justifying, self-validating process. It turns into a game of assuming the conclusions at the beginning of the enquiry. Instead of genuine critical analysis, then, the activity ends up being nothing other than a litany of rationalizations of pre-established views. This litany is generally called “apologetics”.

The key is to GET OUTSIDE the boundary conditions set BY the text FOR the text. It is necessary to transcend this epistemic quagmire, and view the text from outside.

Civil rights / reform has never happened because anyone suddenly started reading the Bible *more carefully*, or decided one day to start following it *more strictly*. What was done in every case of progress was the following: A group of people deciding to RISE ABOVE the established dogma, and move beyond their sacred text, thus enabling adequate room for secular insight to shine through.

In the meantime, we engage in this banal project of piecemeal tinkering. We obsess over specious nuance, and resort to silly games like:

THIS is literally true, but THAT is meant to be taken as a metaphor.

THIS is an account of an actual historical event, but THAT is simply a parable.

This REALLY means x, even though it ACTUALLY SAYS y.

Such exegetical shenanigans are inane, and offer only fatuous claims based on inane rationalizations. By contrast, a legitimate exegesis involves a disinterested, objective critical analysis of sacred texts AS ARTIFACTS. No apologetics. No agenda. Just calling a spade a spade.

At no point does it specify in the Bible, “Once you’ve developed civil society and achieved liberal democracy, please disregard all the punishment, wrath, intolerance, and retribution prescribed in the Pentateuch.” Nowhere in the N.T. does god say, “After the Enlightenment, you can just go ahead and jettison all the barbarism I recommended in the O.T.” The Bible doesn’t contain a single insight that was encountered during the Enlightenment. NOT ONE. Revealingly, in over a thousand pages of text, we don’t encounter even one statement that couldn’t have been made by any pre-Enlightenment person. In other words: The God who allegedly authored the book was clearly a deity with a pre-Enlightenment mind.

This would be astonishingly peculiar...except for the fact that it’s perfectly understandable once we recognize what the Bible really is.

Picture any Enlightenment thinker penning “Revelations”. This would be laughable. It’s a silly, primitive, mindless acid-trip written by iron age cultists with iron age superstitions. No intelligent, enlightened person would have ever concocted such a queer and twisted allegory.

There is no “pearl of great wisdom” waiting to be found in the Bible. One really, really has to try hard to PROJECT onto this primitive, ignorant writing some gem of insight. One finds a lot of “reading between the line” here, mapping current understanding onto the text so as to make it seem remotely insightful. “This is what that passage is REALLY trying to say,” one finds oneself declaring—a silly game one must play in a desperate attempt to pass the book off as some source of profound wisdom.

Rather, we find demands for submission, subservience, obedience, compliance, conformity, surrender, supplication—ideal material to rationalize the oppression, persecution, punishment, torture and execution of anyone who didn’t toe the line. IF ONLY Jesus at ANY POINT had simply mentioned: “Hey. Listen up, everyone. If people happen not to agree with your theology, please don’t oppress, persecute, punish, torture or execute them for it. Ever. I’m about to go through that horrific experience for that very reason. Let’s end all of that after my Passion. Okay? Thanks.”

IF ONLY.

“And please don’t go to war over a difference of religious beliefs. Killing each other over such disagreements is not what my message is.”

Only a couple simple lines would have changed human history for the better. Just a few more words could have avoided endless violence and suffering for the next 20 centuries. Just a couple simple lines. That’s it.

“Oh, and by the way, civil liberties and human rights... Let’s briefly talk about them for a moment, shall we?” Just one more paragraph where Jesus introduced mankind to Enlightenment values would have also remedied endless injustices for the next two thousand years. Why did he abstain? One would think that an infinitely benevolent, omniscient, prescient deity may have thought of that simple memo. Did it not occur to him? Why the glaring omission?

Again: This would be astoundingly bizarre...if not for that fact that it’s completely logical when we acknowledge what the Bible actually is.

In the Muslim’s Haddith, it clearly stipulates that anyone who is an apostate deserves to be killed. (We need not even broach the despicable passages regarding the treatment of women.) Shall we say that all this is “just a metaphor”? Is it the word of god or not? Does it mean what it says or doesn’t it?

Bottom line to any and every professed religious devout who insists (is under the impression that) “I NEED my sacred text” is simply: “No, you don’t. But you’ve been conned into thinking that you do.”

To the Jewish mothers who AREN’T teaching their children all the glorified injustices, cruelty, despicable messages and divinely-endorsed heinous crimes in the Pentateuch, we can easily note: “You don’t require it. You are sufficiently discerning, have adequate initiative to use your own mind, and thereby arrive at sound conclusions. You make prudent judgments via capacities that exist independently of anything you derive from that book.” Like their clergy, they highlight the convenient bits whilst disregarding the inconvenient bits by making use of their innate capacities—then say that all is well.

To every peaceful and compassionate Muslim who actively advocates for civil rights for everyone, we can easily note: “You don’t need the Koran—you never did. You are living proof that one doesn’t require the Koran in order to be a moral, upstanding person. You didn’t need it for your probity. You didn’t need it to have a fulfilling life. You never really needed it, period.” Such a person has made use of their faculties of

judgment that did not themselves derive from the sacred text in order to PARSE the sacred text in a morally acceptable way.

In each case, the person didn't become a good person because he / she read the sacred text EXTRA CAREFULLY. "Au contraire," we can notify each of them, "You managed to realize probity precisely because you DIDN'T depend on the text as the ultimate source of insight. You are good in spite of, not because of, the text you cite. You are a good person who brought your goodness to the text in order to help the text illustrate what you've deemed it appropriately illustrates. You imbued the text with your own erudition in order to render it a vehicle for wisdom."

Most (religious) Jewish mothers are not teaching their children all the horrible things beseeched in the Torah. Why not? Quite simply, they are ignoring it. Whether they admit it or not, they are discounting those "defective" parts based on standards that exist independently of the text. Whether they realize it or not, they are judiciously omitting such things by way of meta-religious criteria. They are debunking the text by their own devices, so as to salvage any modicum of credence the text may have. For tradition's sake, they're extracting the good parts as a way to sustain the illusion that the text has some irreplaceable value.

These moral people who profess devotion are forced to sift through all the garbage and emphasize the few gems they can find—while jettisoning the rest without admitting that that is precisely what they're doing. They recognize those isolated excerpts as gems by BRINGING THEIR OWN UNDERSTANDING AND DISCERNMENT TO the relevant passages—then attributing the virtue of the passages to the holy book rather than themselves. But the virtue does not reside in the holy book—it does not inhere in the verbiage.

This process, then, isn't *exegesis* so much as it is a game of projection and selective citation—a charade maintained for tradition's sake. It is done in the name of preserving a coveted heritage. It is done for the sake of upholding a romanticized legacy. Let's stop pretending that such people are doing something other than this.