

Bahnsen's Three Charges of Prejudice

On pages 135-138 of his book *Always Ready* (page numbers in this blog entry refer to this publication), presuppositional apologist Greg Bahnsen seeks to indoctrinate his readers with the presumption that criticism of Christianity is necessarily borne on "prejudicial conjecture," that

unbelievers, both educated and uneducated, take the offensive against Christianity before they have become familiar with what they're talking about. In the place of research and honest assessment of available evidence concerning some aspect of the Bible, many unbelievers have substituted personal conjecture about what "seems likely" to them. (p. 135)

Apparently "unbelievers" are not supposed to put much stock in what "seems likely" to them, but why they shouldn't remains unexplained. Regardless, we should not let ourselves be fooled by Bahnsen's use of "many unbelievers" as if he meant only a portion of those who do not number themselves among Christendom. It's clear from the context of his statements that he wants to give his devotees the impression that all non-believers are uninformed about the teachings of Christianity (even though a great number of non-believers in the west are themselves former Christians or have at least been widely exposed to Christian zealots), and therefore their criticism of Christianity couldn't possibly have any bearing on the matter. For instance, on p. 137, Bahnsen writes: When we defend our Christian faith, then, we must constantly be on the lookout for the way in which the reasoning of unbelievers rests on prejudicial conjecture. When stated in this fashion, the impression is that one is supposed to that "the reasoning of unbelievers" will be the product of "prejudicial conjecture," even before this has been established. Apparently Bahnsen thinks this is responsible advice.

At any rate, Bahnsen goes on to cite three indications of prejudice which budding apologists should expect to detect in "the reasoning of unbelievers." Let's review them.

1) Prejudice vs. Impartiality: "The *first* [indication of] prejudice is the assumption that the Biblical text is no different from any other written document which we find in our natural experience throughout history - which of course *begs the fundamental question* over which the believer and unbeliever are arguing!" (p. 136)

If it is the case that "the assumption that the Biblical text is no different from any other written document...*begs the fundamental question* over which the believer and unbeliever are arguing," wouldn't the opposite assumption - namely the assumption that the biblical text is significantly "different from any other document which we find in our natural experience throughout history" - also "*beg the fundamental question* over which the believer and unbeliever are arguing"? Bahnsen's rebuttal to reasonable impartiality regarding texts presented for review to non-believers requires him to take for granted the premise that the bible is singularly different from other texts without the need to first establish this premise. In other words, he takes the bible's utter uniqueness as a self-sufficient primary which does not need to be validated. If he could validate this premise, why would he need to do this? Also, we might ask whether Bahnsen would be able to validate his god-belief if he did not take such a premise for granted. In essence, he seems eager to reserve for himself the privilege of "*beg[ging] the fundamental question* over which the believer and unbeliever are arguing" while simultaneously denying this privilege to non-believers. The anxious defender of a weak case would need such an advantage.

But is it really so inappropriate to view the books of the bible as "no different from any other written document"? Bahnsen gives no reason against this other than that it allegedly "*begs the fundamental question* over which the believer and unbeliever are arguing." The Muslim could deploy the same tactic with respect to the Koran. In actuality, there are overriding general features of the bible that it shares with all other written documents which put the bible on the same level. For example, like other written documents, the bible itself is a *written document*. Like other written documents, the bible consists of words written on pages which can be read by readers who can read the language in which those words are written. Also, like other written documents, the bible consists of written statements which readers can examine and relate to the broader sum of knowledge which they have acquired throughout their lives, and thus form judgments about the quality of its content, whether it is true or false, useful or useless, meaningful or meaningless, etc. This is the case with the bible just as it is with a play by Shakespeare, a poem by Pushkin, a play by Moliere, an essay by Jefferson, or a book by Greg Bahnsen. In the case of Shakespeare's play, Pushkin's poem, Moliere's play, Jefferson's essay and Bahnsen's book, each can be judged by its content. Is Bahnsen saying that we should do this in the case of every written document *except* the biblical text? Is Bahnsen worried about what outcome may transpire if someone *does* judge the bible by its content? If he were so confident

that everything in the biblical text is true, would we expect him to fear the outcome of people independently judging it by its content, just as we do in the case of an essay by Russell or a newspaper article?

Bahnsen goes on to say:

If the Bible is, as it claims, the inspired word of Almighty God, then the history of its textual transmission may very well be quite different than other human documents since God would have ordained that its text be preserved with greater integrity than that of ordinary books. (p. 136)

This is a common refrain coming from apologists, but the special pleading and appeal to unseen magical forces are simply embarrassing. In actuality, with the invention of the printing press and the print technology available today, the accurate replication of texts does not present the great potential for error that dogged the copyists of past centuries. Today one can go into any bookstore and pull a Mario Puzo novel off the shelf, and the same title sitting right next to it is precisely the same, right down to a typo on page 172, since they were replicated from the same print master by the same automated technology. Modern technology has at the very least significantly reduced the enormous potential for error that plagues copying texts by hand. No doubt the bible's copyists would have been green with envy had they known about the ease with which their precious bibles could be mass produced today. So ironically, Bahnsen is correct, in a way he did not intend, when he supposes that "the history of [the bible's] textual transmission" is "different than other human documents," since there is no shortage of "other human documents" whose textual reproduction is far more faithful to their respective originals than one could ever hope for in the case of the biblical text, since the automated print technology in use today was not used in the preservation of the biblical text.

But Bahnsen seems oblivious to another point which we would be wrong to ignore when considering his statement here. And that point is the fact that, when we attempt to justify a position by asserting the existence of an invisible magic being, *one can argue anything*. On the premise that there's an invisible magic being that can intervene in human affairs and actualize its wishes such that reality conforms precisely to its will (cf. metaphysical subjectivism), one could even argue that there is no need for a biblical text that must be read in the first place. On such a premise, one could simply argue that "divine knowledge" was zapped into the his mind by "the hand of God," thereby implying that the biblical text is completely superfluous. After all, if there were a magic being that could do this, why wouldn't it, and why would we need to rely on our own reasoned interpretation of "the Scriptures" to come fallibly to the "knowledge of God" which Christians claim to possess? The point is that, if we make allowance for the arbitrary, the arbitrary becomes the standard and reason becomes the first casualty. And when reason has been rejected in this fashion, the human mind has no way to recover itself.

2) Prejudice vs. Consistency: "The *second* indication of prejudice is that the unbeliever does not offer any concrete evidence that (say) some medieval monk tampered with the text before us today." (p. 136)

While above Bahnsen was happy to proceed on the premise that "God would have ordained that [the biblical] text be preserved with greater integrity than that of ordinary books," for which he supplied no supporting evidence, he now expects "the unbeliever" to offer "concrete evidence" to substantiate what is *prima facie* a reasonable possibility. Does Bahnsen really expect people to believe that it is *impossible* that some medieval monk deliberately tampered with the text? Is he expecting us to suppose that it is impossible that some medieval monk *made a mistake* in copying the biblical text? Indeed, it seems that one would have to be quite conflicted psychologically to expect people to accept on the one hand the possibility that an invisible magic being works through human hosts down through the centuries to preserve a religious text which would be superfluous anyway, while on the other hand denying the possibility of deliberate mischief or human error. Perhaps this is akin to the kind of skewed thinking one author of the gospel had in mind when he had his Jesus scold the "blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24). Indeed, the biblical text itself, in Romans 3:4, tells us "let God be true, but every man a liar," which explicitly endorses the assumption that human beings are by nature deceivers. Unless Bahnsen can show that the medieval monks who were responsible for the duplication and preservation of the biblical text were something other than human beings, it seems that the biblical text itself clearly supports the presumption that those same monks were just as prone to deception and vice as everyone else is supposed to be. So on biblical assumptions, we would be wrong to suppose that the medieval monks who took on the task of copying the biblical text were above deliberate tampering with that text as they copied it. But perhaps consistency was not one of Bahnsen's stronger points.

Nevertheless, in considering Bahnsen's claim that "the unbeliever does not offer any concrete evidence that (say) some medieval monk tampered with the text," we should ask: is he expecting his readers to take this claim at face value, without any supporting argument? Does he suppose - and/or does he expect his readers to assume - that

critics of the Christian worldview are completely ignorant of what it teaches, in spite of the facts that Christianity is the dominant religion in the west and that former Christians typically make the most informed critics of Christianity? Do Bahnsen's gratuitous assumptions comport with the awareness he is trying to raise against prejudice? It seems that, if Bahnsen were genuinely concerned about prejudice, he would not answer alleged prejudice with just more prejudice.

In fact, there is concrete evidence that someone tampered with the text, in some cases even before the monastic orders were instituted by the church and commissioned with copying it. For instance, the oldest known manuscripts of the gospel of Mark end at 16:8, while today's bible's have Mark end at 16:20. At some point, probably still very early, these latter 12 verses were tacked on, and I doubt a talking snake did this. The same is the case with the final chapter of the gospel of John, often referred to by scholars as the *Appendix*. The gospel most sensibly ends at chapter 20, but the version we find in our modern bibles includes a 21st chapter. [One article on the topic](#) describes it as follows:

The text of the [Gospel of John](#) appears to reach a conclusion at the end of chapter 20, as the text summarises the many signs that [Jesus](#) performed for his followers, not all of which could be recorded in the Gospel. John 21 begins simply with *After these things...* ([Greek](#): ?et? ta?ta) and nonchalantly recounts another appearance of Jesus, as if the conclusion at the end of the prior chapter hadn't been there - as if the text was going "...and they all lived happily ever after. The end. Anyway, back in galilee they ...".

Who tacked on these endings on these gospels? In the case of the gospel of Mark, this is especially significant since without the added ending, Mark would end (and originally ended) without any post-resurrection sightings. And if believers insist that the last 12 verses of Mark's gospel are authentic scripture, then I have a jar of dark liquid for them to drink.

3) Prejudice vs. Informed Criticism: "The *third* indication of prejudice in the criticism of the unbeliever is that he or she has not taken account of the actual evidence which is publicly available regarding the text of Scripture. If the critic had taken time to look into this subject, he or she would not have offered the outlandish evaluation that the Biblical text is unreliable." (p. 136)

This is the same tired and over-used generalization that critics couldn't possibly know what they're talking about, and as such constitutes a prejudice on Bahnsen's part which he is more than happy to promulgate among his devotees. Bahnsen tries to bring his point home with the following autobiographical anecdote:

This came home to me with great force after taking an advanced course on Plato in graduate school, a course which took account of the textual criticism of the literary corpus of Plato's works. Our earliest extant manuscript of a work by Plato dates from right before 900 A.D.... and we must remember that Plato is thought to have lived roughly 350 years before Christ - thus leaving us with a gap of over twelve centuries. By contrast, the earliest fragments of the New Testament date less than fifty years after the original writing; the bulk of our most important extant manuscripts dates from 200-300 years after original composition." (pp. 136-137)

It is unclear what exactly Bahnsen thinks this contrast, which non-believers should have no problem acknowledging, is supposed to prove. Presumably Bahnsen's concern is to prove that Christianity is true, not that the earliest copies we have of the text of the New Testament are closer in time to their original writing than Plato's works. Even if we found a copy of Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* that was produced two weeks after he had completed it, what would this prove? Would this prove that there was actually an Emerald City populated with horses which perpetually changed colors and witches who could fly on broomsticks? Of course not. Perhaps Bahnsen is saying that, if we accept the existence of a man named Plato on the basis of his writings whose earliest manuscripts date some twelve or so centuries after the time when he is supposed to have lived, then we should accept the existence of a god-man named Jesus whose extant biographical documents date to within decades of their supposed original composition. But this is a non sequitur which relies on blurring certain key distinctions. For one thing, in the case of Plato's writings, someone had to compose them. Whether they were originally written by Plato himself, or by his pupils, is really irrelevant. The teachings in those writings are attributed to a man, and whether this man's name was Plato or something else, is not really that big a deal. Since non-believers are not people who worship a god, they aren't going to deify Plato either. If it turned out to be the case that the ideas we attribute to Plato were actually conceived and developed by a small band of Scythians, would it cause us to change our lives? Let's not forget also that none of the texts in the New Testament purport to have come from Jesus' own hand. Many of the texts are anonymous, some are clearly pseudonymous, and contrary to what Bahnsen claims, the New Testament record is far from "remarkably uniform." (p. 137; see my blog [Reckless Apologetic Presumptuousness](#).)

But still, Bahnsen claims that there is "actual evidence which is publicly available regarding the text of Scripture."

Evidence which supports specifically what? That the New Testament was written almost 2,000 years ago? Who disputes this? Is Bahnsen saying that there's "actual evidence which is publicly available" which supports the view that the events it records actually happened? In regard to "Scripture," Bahnsen says that "its truth has a public nature, open to inspection" (p. 127), but complains that teachings such as those about a "[c]onscious life following physical death, everlasting damnation, and a future resurrection are not readily accepted." (p. 126) But what evidence does Bahnsen or any other Christian apologist present to support its teachings? For instance, "the text of Scripture" claims that there is a heaven. What "publicly available" evidence can Bahnsen or other Christians supply to support this claim? Where is this heaven, and how can its existence be verified? Can such a claim be scientifically tested? If not, why not? The existence of extraterrestrial places, such as planets, moons, asteroids, comets, nebulae, galaxies, etc., can be scientifically verified, so why can't heaven? "Scripture" also claims that there is a hell, presumably a place where souls are flame-broiled without reprieve for all eternity. (I thought souls were immaterial - how is it that they can burn? If God has a soul, is it flame-retardant?) What "publicly available" evidence do Christians supply to support these claims? Do they accept them because they know of concrete evidence for their existence, but choose to keep that evidence to themselves? Or, do they accept these teachings as truth without evidence, perhaps in the fear that it might be true?

Let's consider another example. In Matthew 27:52-53, the following event is said to have occurred when Jesus died on the cross:

52 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose,
53 And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

Now, this is quite a remarkable event indeed. Either that, or it's a complete fabrication. Since Christians want to say that the entirety of the bible is wholly true, inerrant and infallible, they consequently would defend the claim that this event really happened. But what evidence do we have for this that is "publicly available"? No other New Testament document corroborates this alleged event - perhaps that's what Bahnsen meant by the "The word of the Lord is self-attestingly true and authoritative"? (p. 25) But if such an event did occur, it would be astonishing to find that no one other than the author of Matthew would have thought to make a note of it. Indeed, no extrabiblical source supports it. Imagine a crowd of reanimated corpses walking throughout a city who "appeared unto many" of its inhabitants, and yet no witness had the presence of mind to write about it! Apologists may claim that the author of Matthew was an eyewitness, but even the book of Matthew does not claim this; indeed, it records other things that its author could not have been an eyewitness (such as the virgin birth, the temptation in the wilderness, etc.). Perhaps we're supposed to believe this story on the basis of the supposed fact that the earliest manuscripts date to within 200-300 years of its original writing? I trow not.

For that matter, what "publicly available" evidence supports the claim that Jesus rose from the dead? The bible cannot serve as proof of this since it is where this claim is found in the first place. A claim does not double as its own proof. It is the claim which needs to be proven in the first place. Showing that the copies of the writings in which the claim is found date to within 200-300 years of their original composition does not prove that the claim contained in those writings is true. A proof needs support relating to the details of the claim which is being proved. (Of course, there's no way to prevent apologists from delivering a [Poof!](#))

So it seems that Bahnsen's charge that non-believers operate on the basis of prejudice is itself an instance of the pot calling the kettle black. In fact, it's rather easy to see through. What's sad is that Bahnsen's devotees lap up his contempt for non-believers as if it were water at the height of drought season. Whatever makes them feel better, I guess.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [11:00 AM](#)

4 Comments:

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

Very interesting entry. This has inspired me on an idea for an entry of my own based on your list.

[November 25, 2005 10:40 AM](#)

[breakerslion](#) said...

Very nice. I also liked "Bahnsen's Poof", and I have a new bookmark.

Now that someone is doing such a nice job of cutting through Bahnsen's smoke, do you suppose his followers will be switching to mirrors anytime soon?

I have in my hand a frozen waffle. The matter that makes up this waffle has been in the Universe in some form or other since the beginning. If this waffle were suddenly to utterly cease to exist, the Universe would no longer be complete, and therefore *would not be the same Universe it had been up until that time*. If this statement is accepted as accurate, then the waffle is as integral to the Universe as Bahnsen's alleged god, and *nobody* had better try to tell me that my waffle is omnipotent!

[November 27, 2005 7:01 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

That was excellent, Dawson. Seriously...between nodding in agreement and chuckling at things like "maybe a talking snake did it" I had more fun reading this article than anything I've read in a long time.

[November 28, 2005 11:18 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

<http://presstheantithesis.blogspot.com/2005/12/greg-bahnsens-self-appointed-internet.html>

I'll be responding here.

[December 28, 2005 10:26 AM](#)