

## **A Fourth Paradigm? Some Thoughts on Atheism in Old Testament Scholarship**

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There has perhaps been an evil hour for every philosopher, in which he thought: What do I matter, if people should not believe my poor arguments! And then some malicious bird has flown past him and twittered: “What do you matter? What do you matter?”<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

*In recent decades, OT scholarship has witnessed the emergence of undercurrents of what may be called a fourth paradigm. In contrast to the three familiar faith-based “paradigms,” this one is essentially atheistic. Scholars working in the fourth paradigm do not believe that the Bible is the Word of God, God’s Word in human speech, or human words about God. On this view, the texts are just human words and have no transcendental signified. In addition, a plurality of atheistic approaches to the text is operative within the varieties of atheism that can be distinguished. Ultimately though, this paradigm too has its pros and cons, both of which have implications with regard to future prospects for local atheist OT scholars. This article aims to present only a brief, personal, and introductory take on a controversial subject.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

According to one popular albeit rather outdated and oversimplified division, three different paradigms can be distinguished within biblical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The first involves biblical scholars working in the spirit of the Reformation and view the Bible as the *Word of God*. In this *pre-modern* paradigm, a historical-literal type of exegesis and a *fundamentalist* hermeneutic are typical. The text-reality relation is viewed in naïve-realist terms.<sup>3</sup> A second paradigm, associated with *modernism* and with historical-critical approaches to biblical interpreta-

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (trans. J. Nauckhoff and A. Del Caro; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Izak Spangenberg, “Paradigm Changes in the Bible Sciences and the Teaching of Biblical Studies in the New South Africa,” *Scriptura* 52 (1995): 1-10; Johan. H. Coetzee, “Practicing Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Biblical Sciences under One South African Roof” (inaugural lecture as professor of Old Testament Studies in the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies at the Rand Afrikaans University on 13 March 2002).

<sup>3</sup> On a philosophical clarification of ontological assumptions in Old Testament theology, see Jaco Gericke, “Realism and Non-Realism in Old Testament Theology: A Formal-Logical and Religious Philosophical Assessment,” *OTE* 19/1 (2006): 47-57.

tion, takes the Bible to be the *Word of God in human speech*. Here referentiality is appropriated in critical-realist fashion and a liberal theology provides the contextual background. The third and last paradigm is considered to be postmodern and associated with socio-literary approaches to the text. A radical theology and non-realism link with this perspective and the text is considered to be *human words about God*.

Let us for the sake of the argument adopt this tripartite paradigm structure.<sup>4</sup> If one works primarily with eras in epistemology (pre-modern, modern, post-modern) and note related emerging trends in exegesis, the outline reconstructed above may *prima facie* appear to offer a functional categorisation of parallel and interpenetrating intellectual trends.<sup>5</sup> However, a critical appropriation of the scheme reveals its theocentric bias, that is, the theological descriptions of the paradigms are all *theistic*, the wording presupposing as it does that the words of the text somehow relate to an extra-textual deity ("of God," "God's" and "about God"). There is in the phraseology seemingly no designated location for atheistic biblical interpretation and OT atheology (The Bible as words, period).<sup>6</sup>

Yet it is hardly a secret that since the modern era there have been biblical scholars who did not believe that there is any god in the world outside the text to whom its words relate to.<sup>7</sup> The tripartite paradigm-model thus privileges

<sup>4</sup> The concept of "paradigm" is used somewhat equivocally by Spangenberg since Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed.; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), x did not deem it in anyway appropriate jargon for use in the humanities (social sciences). Moreover, whereas Kuhnian paradigms are incommensurable, those of Spangenberg are not so, at least not on the level of methodology.

<sup>5</sup> See the analysis of John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2005).

<sup>6</sup> To be sure, this is a matter of interpretation. It can be argued that the complexities of biblical interpretation are completely obfuscated with this rather simple proposal. Firstly, fundamentalism and historical-literalism are often not seen as pre-modern but actually emerge particularly from Modernism as can be seen by its development from more or less 1870. Secondly, it would be quite possible to relegate some of what can be called socio-literary forms of exegesis also to a modernistic framework, as can be seen by much of what is being done within social-scientific studies. Thirdly, a hermeneutics of "human words about God" can also be seen as atheistic if the word "God" is used as a proper name with no reference. The tripartite model thus potentially distorts how atheistic biblical interpretation was always present and does not explain why it manifested itself in some instances, nor attempts to demonstrate how. On this critique the three approaches cannot be unified by claiming a "theistic" underlying point of departure, as this need not be a necessary point of departure in either modernism or post-modernism. The division above is thus indeed in many ways reductionist, oversimplified and stereotypical.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: W. W. Norton, 1999).

theism to the extent of silencing atheistic perspectives. Moreover, by the concept of "atheistic perspectives" I do not mean to include everything that is nowadays classified as being "non-theistic," namely also agnosticism, post-theism and panentheism.<sup>8</sup> I also do not wholly equate atheism in biblical scholarship with what has come to be known as "secular biblical criticism,"<sup>9</sup> and which is usually contrasted with "faith-based scholarship."<sup>10</sup> What is meant by atheism in OT scholarship in the context of this article is a polytypic phenomenon instantiating the necessary properties of an overt or covert atheological perspective which has no interest in a Ricoeurian "second naivete."

While relatively rare in professional organisations in OT Studies, atheistic perspectives on the biblical texts have been around for centuries. In the lay arena these often took the form of anything from books and pamphlets to internet sites dedicated to debunking the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Over the last decade the coming into being of the so-called "New Atheists" has contributed to a rising interest in public atheology.<sup>12</sup> Yet many students of theology and outsiders find the idea of atheism in biblical scholarship extremely odd, if not suspicious.<sup>13</sup> However, whereas in the past most theology students who became atheists dropped out, a new generation of students of the OT is coming into being who, though having lost all faith in Christianity, still want to become biblical scholars.<sup>14</sup> It should therefore be clear that the tripartite model hides the fact that each of the paradigms' theological perspectives represses the presence of atheological traces

<sup>8</sup> Izak Spangenberg, "Can a Major Religion Change? Reading Genesis 1-3 in the 21st century," *VE* 28/1 (2007): 259-279.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Michael V. Fox, "Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited 24 Feb 2012]. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=490>.

<sup>11</sup> A typical example of lay atheology as atheist critique of the Bible is Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> New Atheism is associated with scholars who are not biblical scholars, e.g., Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Victor J. Stenger.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Yahoo Questions, "Is it Possible to be a Bible Scholar and an Atheist at the Same Time?," n.p. [cited 4 June 2012]. Online: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080718165507AAUOaQa>.

<sup>14</sup> Robert M. Price, "Biblical Criticism," in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (ed. Tom Flynn; Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 123-134. Interestingly, it has been atheist NT scholars rather than their Old Testament colleagues who have managed to incur the most public wrath. However, in South Africa it is arguably the case that the opposite is true, considering the impact of critical scholarship by pioneers of public theology such as Ferdinand Deist and Izak Spangenberg (though neither was atheistic).

within the system. Yet doing so can no longer be considered an accurate assessment of the history of OT scholarship. If one accepts the traditional tripartite scheme it has to be admitted that on this same view the outlines of a fourth paradigm are slowly emerging that render any purely theocentric division endlessly problematic.

## B THE FOURTH PARADIGM

In what follows I shall suggest a hypothetical and speculative typology of the fourth paradigm's internal structures. The historical time-frame covered here, however, will be limited to the most recent developments. It therefore brackets already well-researched representatives of secular biblical criticism such as Spinoza. Instead, it will span only the last two decades (circa 1990 to 2010). This choice of delimitation is not arbitrary but concerns the fact that it was especially during these two decades that OT studies had witnessed the rising popularity of non-theistic interpretative methodologies such as ideology criticism (1990's) and secular biblical criticism (2000's).<sup>15</sup> It involves introductory remarks on a controversial subject in an academic context where atheism is still not considered a topic worth our while and in which its voices are often muted. Thus a disclaimer: the main and overall objective of this article is *not* to provide an exhaustive scientific inquiry filled with empirical evidence that would satisfy a sociologist of religion looking for hard data from fieldwork among biblical scholars. Rather, due to the elusive nature of the phenomenon and the absence of a substantial body of existing research materials, I aim to offer only general remarks on atheism in OT scholarship based on personal experiences and with the aid of perspectives from philosophy of religion, meta-commentary and bits and pieces of autobiographical criticism.

## C VARIETIES OF ATHEISM AND ATHEIST APPROACHES

Scholars of religion disagree how best to define and classify *atheism*, contesting what supernatural entities it applies to, whether it is an assertion in its own right or merely the absence of one, and whether it requires a conscious, explicit rejection.<sup>16</sup> A variety of categories have been proposed to try and distinguish different forms of atheism. In this regard, the following popular distinctions are still considered standard:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> On the subject of varieties of atheism and related controversies, see Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> James Thrower, *The Alternative Tradition: A Study of Unbelief in the Ancient World* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980); John C. A. Gaskin, *Varieties of Unbelief: from Epicurus to Sartre* (University of Michigan: Macmillan, 1989).

- (i) There is explicit versus implicit atheism which refers to the distinction between the belief that there is no god as opposed to simply the absence of a belief in god. Arguably all atheist OT scholars are of the explicit (positive) type, if only because having embarked on their studies as theists, only good reasons would have sufficed for a complete deconversion.
- (ii) Then there is broad atheism versus narrow atheism, namely the view that no gods whatsoever exists as opposed to atheism relative to a particular god or gods (e.g. YHWH). While most OT scholars who are atheists will consider themselves as being of the broad type, what they usually reject is the concept of deity in classical or modern Christian theism.<sup>18</sup>
- (iii) Positive atheism is atheism proper while negative atheism refers to all varieties of non-theism (agnosticism, post-theism, panentheism, apatheism, anatheism, etcetera. Because of social stigmas and psychological constraints, most OT scholars who are not theists have tended to have themselves classified as being of the latter variety as opposed to calling themselves atheists outright. Positive atheism remains a rare confession in the guild.
- (iv) Another opposition is between hard versus soft atheism, which refers to atheist scholars who confess their atheism as opposed to others who prefer to keep quiet about it. In my experience, most OT scholars who are atheists are not that vocal about it, especially in the contents of their research. It is often impossible to ascertain the personal convictions of some of the authors publishing in accredited peer-reviewed journals. Those who of the hard type tend to be those who seek to promote atheism as a cause,<sup>19</sup> as opposed to keeping it private as a default view.

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<sup>18</sup> See Gary Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). There is a section of the role of biblical criticism in the development of atheism, though not very substantial in nature. A completely delusional optimistic conservative analogy to this is Alister E. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). Both these scholars, though different from one another, are systematic theologians who fail to grasp the implication of biblical criticism for their theistic optimism.

<sup>19</sup> A 2009 report on a meeting to explore the feasibility of establishing a group that would focus on non-religious approaches to biblical studies runs as follows: Time and Place: Saturday, November 21, 6:45pm-8:15pm in Conference Room Studio 6 of the Marriott Hotel in New Orleans, LA. Attendance: Kenneth Atkinson, Hector Avalos (moderator of meeting), Zeba Crook, Stephanie Fisher, Jim Linville, John Loftus, Ken Pulliam, Frank Zindler. The meeting began with introductions, and a description of the goals that such a group should have. Two basic positions were identified: (1) an activist position that would focus on direct challenges to religion and/or the Bible; (2) a non-activist position that would focus on scholarship from a non-religious approach.

- (v) We also encounter strong (or dogmatic) versus weak (or sceptical) atheism, that is, atheism that is cock-sure of itself and atheism which merely suspects itself to be true but remain open to being proved wrong. OT scholars who are atheist tend to be of the dogmatic type, if only because many feel they would not have deconverted if they were in the least unsure of being right.
- (vi) Finally there is theoretical versus practical atheism, which denotes the distinction between unbelief with reasons to back it up as opposed to a less intellectual rationale that basically involves living as though no god exists. While most OT scholars will surely have their reasons why they think no god exists and are therefore of the theoretical type, the majority will not seek to present and argue these grounds in their research on the Bible.

These categories are distinct though they can overlap. Thus while it may not be immediately obvious, "explicit" is not the same as "positive," which is not the same as "hard" and not the same as "strong." One can be an explicit atheist of the weak variety. Given these varieties of atheism, the question now concerns their manifestation in scholarly approaches to the OT. Since no specifically tailored typology currently exists, I propose that the following approaches be distinguished within biblical interpretation. Only familiar repre-

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A compromise of sorts was reached by focusing on scholarship that could both challenge religionist biases and ideas in biblical studies in a scholarly and non-hostile manner, and also contribute original scholarship that would be distinctive of a non-religious approach. The participants agreed to pursue a two-track approach to establishing the group. One track would focus on preparing the proposal necessary to establish a new unit within the SBL. By a vote of 8-0, the proposed name of the unit chosen was "Secular Criticism of the Bible" consultation/group. However, the establishment of a new unit in the SBL is a long process that might take 2-5 years before the first session would be scheduled in an Annual Meeting of the SBL. Accordingly, second track was adopted that would work with an existing SBL unit, preferably the Ideological Criticism Section, and propose sessions on non-religious approaches to biblical studies. Such sessions could be scheduled as early as next year. These sessions also would help to draw people interested in working with the first track. See Hector Avalos, "A Brief Report on a Secular Criticism of the Bible Group for the SBL," n.p. [cited 29 May 2012]. Online: <http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/2009/11/brief-report-on-secular-biblical.html>. This group has now evolved, and it has been integrated into the Society of Biblical Literature as a new unit called "Metacriticism of Biblical Scholarship," whose mission is as follows: This unit critically evaluates suppositions in and underlying biblical scholarship, including how an explicitly non-religious approach differs from what is even now represented as historical-critical scholarship, especially when compared to other secular disciplines within the Humanities (history, classical studies) and the Social Sciences (e.g., anthropology, sociology). See: [http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses\\_Program\\_Units.aspx?MeetingId=21](http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_Program_Units.aspx?MeetingId=21).

sentatives are noted with background knowledge of the referenced literature being presupposed as there is no room for in-depth discussion of textual examples. Additional relevant justifying data is provided in the footnotes:

- (i) *Descriptive approaches* that seek only to clarify the meaning of the text whilst bracketing the (de)merits of its truth-claims. One example of this type of scholarship is some of the work of Philip Davies.<sup>20</sup> The atheism is of the implicit, hard, weak, negative and practical variety.
- (ii) *Atheological approaches* that are aimed exclusively at debunking the Bible and much of biblical scholarship. The atheism here is explicit, narrow, positive, hard, strong and theoretical. An excellent example of this approach can be found in the writings of Hector Avalos.<sup>21</sup>
- (iii) *Reconstructive approaches* that, though atheistic, also seek to show the continuing relevance of the Bible for a secular society. One instance of biblical scholarship that falls under this profile is the work of Jacques Berlinerblau.<sup>22</sup> The type of atheism is implicit, broad, positive, hard, strong and practical.
- (iv) *Crypto-atheist approaches* to OT scholarship that represent an ambiguous non-realism that chooses not come out of the proverbial closet. Curiously, the hypertextualist ontology of Walter Brueggemann's OT theology fits the bill here although the atheism in question is explicit, narrow, weak, negative and theoretical in nature.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (JSOTSup 204; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007), Hector Avalos, "Why Biblical Studies Must End," in *The End of Christianity* (ed. J. W. Loftus; Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, *How to be Secular: A Field Guide for Religious Moderates, Atheists and Agnostics* (Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt, forthcoming 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). I am aware that many will dispute the idea that Brueggemann represents any form of crypto-atheism, including the man himself. Note however that the non-realist rhetoric of Brueggemann's theology is different from the public theology he writes. While everything he puts on the table is tinged with a postmodern homiletic flavour, Brueggemann's attempt at sounding fashionable and up to date with intellectual Continental philosophical trends betrays a superficial internalisation of post-modern nihilism. Yet the fact of his reiterating on several occasions that the Old Testament is just words about a god who is constructed wholly immanent within the biblical discourse and who does not exist outside that realm makes him a narrow yet hard atheist with reference to YHWH as depicted in the biblical discourse. It is for this reason that I claim that Brueggemann represents a form of narrow crypto-atheism.

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- (v) *Postmodern approaches* to the text that can by definition not be theistic given the social constructionist understanding of the character of YHWH in biblical theology. David J. A. Cline's narrow, positive, weak, explicit, theoretical atheism seems to be a good exemplar of this type.<sup>24</sup>
- (vi) *Apathetic approaches* that are represented by scholars who do not believe a god exists yet do not care for the theism/atheism controversies when doing research. Many postmodern feminist interpreters are examples of this. The atheism here usually implicit, negative, narrow, soft and practical.

To be sure, these approaches are not watertight and wholly separate categories. Rather, they should be seen as possibly broadly overlapping and fluid trends within OT hermeneutics. As such they are stereotypes with many exceptions. Also, representatives of the different approaches seem to have rather divergent agendas. In this regard we must distinguish *atheist scholars* from *atheological approaches* to the OT. Not all atheist scholars engage in atheological criticism. Thus in descriptive, crypto- and apathetic *approaches* to the text, there is no readily apparent atheological agenda. There the concern lies mainly with the clarification of meaning. The complexity extends to the fact that there is no singular interpretative methodology of choice involved here. One encounters atheist scholars in historical criticism, literary criticism, post-modern criticism, and so on. As with regard to atheological criticism, both atheological and reconstructive approaches will tend to be more vocal in their atheism. As such they are attracted to issues in hermeneutics, reception criticism and a variety of ideological-critical approaches to the text. While these two approaches usually involves an atheological mission or secular cause, the readings tend to be more nuanced and sophisticated than those of, say, the New Atheists with their primarily moral critiques of OT theology.<sup>25</sup>

## D PROS AND CONS

One oft cited boon of atheist approaches is the alleged ability to read the text more objectively. Not having vested interests in the text supporting personal religious beliefs, one is able to bracket distortive assumptions of church theology so as to see the god-talk of the text for the alien discourse that it is. Indeed, if practiced descriptively, atheistic approaches can well be less prone to dog-

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<sup>24</sup> David J. A. Cline, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967-1998* (vol. 2; JSOTSup 292; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). Note that while I locate Cline under the rubric of post-modernism, the variety of post-modernism that his writing inhabits is post-modernism-as-hyper-modernism rather than post-modern in the more deconstructive sense.

<sup>25</sup> See for example the autobiographical details of the profile of atheist Hebrew Bible scholar James Linville: James Linville, "James Linville," n.p. [cited: 4 June 2012]. Online: <http://uleth.academia.edu/JamesLinville>.

matic *eisegesis* than those found in "faith-based scholarship."<sup>26</sup> Secondly, atheistic scholarship can also be socially relevant to promote the value of a secular society. Jacques Berlinerblau's *Secular Bible* shows precisely why rigorous and respectful critiques of political theology are what is needed in today's world where the Bible is roped in the service of fundamentalist and liberal-theological agendas.<sup>27</sup> Finally, some atheological atheistic critiques are able to expose the smugness of what goes for much of OT scholarship. In his *End of Biblical Studies*, Hector Avalos points out that biblical scholars and institutions that continue to support the study of the Bible do so more out of a sense of self-preservation than for any real benefit to society.<sup>28</sup>

On the con side, while often held by insiders to be more objective in exegesis, many atheist or secular scholars usually have some axe to grind or something to prove. When one is bent on discrediting biblical ideology, one is just as prone to project anachronistic concerns onto the ancient biblical discourse. Personal agendas overriding hermeneutic neutrality are often overlooked by secular scholars and, as a result, the words of Nietzsche with regard to interpretation as autobiographical are not taken cognisance of.

However far man may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, much of what goes for atheist biblical scholarship are still very positivistic. This not only in the negative modernist sense but also in the sense of being completely oblivious to the formative effect of the Lacanian symbolic register that unbelievers also participate in simply by utilising public language. While many look to natural science to deliver insights to connect them with the Real, the fact is that there is no transcendental meta-language offering a god's eye-view with which to criticize biblical and faith-based readerly ideologies.<sup>30</sup> Atheist biblical scholars do not just read the text but have to interpret it according to the available frameworks already extent within biblical criticism. In doing so, some atheist biblical scholars adopt the anti-philosophical sentiment of the establishment and cling to philosophically-outdated hermeneutical conceptions. Another possible con is a denial of the reality that

<sup>26</sup> See Fox, "Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View," n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (trans. M. Faber, with S. Lehmann; University of Nebraska Press, 1984 [original 1878]), 238.

<sup>30</sup> See Don Cupitt, *Philosophy's Own Religion* (London, SCM Press, 2001), 87. Even Fox admits as much, see Michael V. Fox, "Response from Michael V. Fox," n.p. [cited on 4 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=521>. For the whole story, see <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/integrative/Faithbased%20essays.pdf>.

faith-based scholarship will always find a way into biblical scholarship in order to try and establish some sort of intellectual credibility. We see this all the time, so that the belief that secular biblical scholarship can become the norm is little more than wishful thinking. Also, as far as funding is concerned, it might become even more difficult to justify studying the OT on a university budget without the financial and ideological support of religious institutions. Faith-based interested parties are still the main driving forces that allows for the academic study of religious texts.<sup>31</sup>

On a more individual level, another point on the con side concerns the possible loss of initial motivation to study the OT. As Mark Coleridge noted in his *Life in the Crypt or Why Bother with Biblical Studies*,<sup>32</sup> we usually assume the importance, even the necessity, of what we do as students of the Bible, yet it is not clear to many that our assumption is justified these days. One may indeed pose the question, Why bother with biblical studies *now*? Answers that might once have been given no longer apply in a moment when the great master-narratives of (at least) Western culture have collapsed and when the only alternative seems to be that everyone create his or her own myth. Coleridge therefore considers exegesis under the aspect of mourning and asks whether there might be any life in the crypt.

Though answering in the affirmative, for many the existentialist *ennui* cannot so easily be disposed of. Nihilism rears its head to every OT scholar who has lost the faith and wondered what the point of their work could possibly be. Perhaps as atheists we do what we do because it's what we once wanted to do and what we now do to keep us busy until we die. It is no longer a means to an ultimate end for we no longer believe that any project of human knowledge can claim to have lasting value.

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<sup>31</sup> In South Africa all the large centres where Biblical Studies are practiced are also institutions of education that cater to the need of religious communities, without whose support the influx of students and therefore a market for the research done would be severely jeopardised. The question of public relevancy in theology unfortunately seldom takes secular approaches seriously. Here the double standards with regard to free speech are most visible. Consider the public tolerance of the nonsense spouted by a biblical illiterate Angus Buchan at his "Mighty Men" conferences *vis-à-vis* their outrage at atheists such as George Claassen from *Sceptics South Africa* who tries to get people to think critically. In schools children are allowed to listen to the distortion of the Bible by ministers and pastors yet there will be no equal room for atheist rallies or courses in secular biblical criticism for children. See George Claassen, "Claassen Tree uit Debat oor Godsdiens in Skole," *Die Burger*, n.p. [cited 15 May 2012] Online: <http://152.111.1.87/argief/berigte/dieburger/2009/09/24/SK/1/BOLjgSkeptieseGeorge.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Coleridge, "Life in the Crypt or Why Bother with Biblical Studies," *BibInt* 2/2 (1994): 139-151.

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened.<sup>33</sup>

Though this applies to the will-to-knowledge as a whole, the question of how the continued existence of post-realist OT studies can be justified on both the personal and societal level will remain to haunt anyone working within the fourth paradigm.

## **E FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR LOCAL ATHEISTS**

Various personal and professional backgrounds exist for atheism in South African academic OT scholarship. Most of us were once theology students preparing for the ministry. Some became atheists before we became professional biblical scholars (e.g. as students). Others among us became atheists as a result of our later research. Many lost their faith as a result of what they perceived to be the implications of the findings of biblical scholarship for our traditional Christian faith, supplemented with what we learnt about the human condition in other theological subjects and in auxiliary disciplines like philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, *etcetera*.<sup>34</sup>

Whether one grew up in a fundamentalist or a more liberal religious context, the journey to unbelief, if it occurred within Biblical Studies, usually means a psychological transformation. Especially if one considered oneself a "biblical" Christian to begin with.<sup>35</sup> This can be experienced as traumatic, liberating, or both, depending on individual social and psychological variables. It can be extremely traumatic to leave a state of mind and a social context which offered one the rationale for wanting to study the OT in the first place. Most students who lose their faith therefore rather leave biblical scholarship alto-

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<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in the Non-Moral sense* (London: SCM, 1873), 1.

<sup>34</sup> This section is not an empirical study based on questionnaires and fieldwork. It represents impressions based on the author's personal experiences of over a decade and interactions with peers who would prefer to remain anonymous.

<sup>35</sup> On the phenomenon of Biblical Christianity, see Robert Carroll, *Wolf in The Sheepfold: The Bible as Problem for Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1991); see also James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1977); James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

gether and only as few continue to remain therein. They do so for a variety of reasons, including unresolved issues (mourning), denial, practical reasons (peers, friends, family, etc.), and so on.

Old Testament scholars who start out conservative will often go through phases preceding atheism proper, for example, liberal, post-liberal, radical and agnostic. Most will never go as far as atheism, or will entertain the idea but ultimately settle for some liberal postmodern type of theology. That is if there is not a later regression back to fundamentalism. The type of background also often determines the type of atheism the scholar crosses over to. Those from very fundamentalist backgrounds tend towards becoming either crypto- or atheological atheists, whereas those from more liberal contexts are more likely to become descriptive, reconstructive or apathetic atheist scholars. In the end, however, the journey to atheism is very individual and complex.

So let us now imagine a show of hands at an OTSSA conference: “Who here’s an atheist?” If a keynote speaker were to pose that unlikely query to an audience of 100 scholars my guess is only about a handful or so would publicly confess to unbelief. In South Africa self-acclaimed atheists are few and far between in biblical scholarship.<sup>36</sup> To some extent this has to do with the fact that either those who become atheists leave the field or those that stay find that job opportunities tend to be denied to nonbelievers. The situation is roughly the same in the United States:

Now we can better identify what is not well with biblical scholarship. Composed almost entirely of faith-based researchers on one extreme and “secularists” on the other, the field itself is structurally preconditioned to make heretical insight difficult to generate and secular research nearly impossible. To the non-believing undergraduate who tells me that he or she wants to go into biblical studies, I respond (with Dante and Weber) *lasciate ogni speranza*. This is not so much because they will encounter discrimination. They might, but if my experiences are representative, they will more frequently be the beneficiaries of the kindness of pious strangers. There is a much more mundane reason for prospective non-theist Biblicalists to abandon hope: there are no jobs for them.<sup>37</sup>

The author continues:

Assume for a moment that you are an atheist exegete. Now please follow my instructions. Peruse the listings in *Openings*. Understand

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<sup>36</sup> One contemporary example is the early work of Jaco W. Gericke, e.g., “Does Yahweh Exist? The Case against Realism in Old Testament Theology,” *OTE* 17/1 (2004): 30-57.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, “The Unspeakable in Biblical Scholarship,” *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited 11 Feb 2012]. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=503>.

that your unique skills and talents are of no interest to those institutions listed there with the words "Saint" and "Holy" and "Theological" and "Seminary" in their names. This leaves, per year, about two or three advertised posts in biblical studies at religiously un-chartered institutions of higher learning. Apply for those jobs. Get rejected. A few months later learn—preferably while consuming donuts with a colleague—that the position was filled by a graduate of a theological seminary. Realize that those on the search committee who made this choice all graduated from seminaries themselves. Curse the gods.<sup>38</sup>

The South African context is not that different. One of the major challenges for local atheist students and professional biblical scholars is finding an opportunity to stay in the business in order to create a space where some or other contribution can be made to the research on the OT. That is if one still sees a point in such research to begin with. The best strategy for survival is to avoid the discrimination and persecution of authorities that still try to fight against secularism, stay safe from the fundamentalist outcries against secularism in biblical scholarship, and finding a way to teach students that does not impose the atheist ideology nor provoke or traumatise anyone intentionally.<sup>39</sup>

Personally (for this topic, though scientific, is necessarily personal), I believe atheist scholars can contribute to biblical scholarship, even if the whole thing has lost its original enchantment for them. As for the point of studying the OT as an atheist in South Africa, it might well be different things for different biblical scholars. The truth is that some of us who no longer share the ideology of the text and the communities in awe of it still study the OT because we have managed to stay interested in the ancient culture, even though we have become detached like Egyptologists studying ancient Egyptian mythology without any belief in its deities. Most of us do not want to change careers midstream – especially if theology was all we ever wanted to do. So we can still make a living out of it even though we know in our heart of hearts that, like life itself, all of biblical scholarship is in the end but a game. This does not mean that we do not take it seriously – on the contrary, the desire to excel and invent new strategies of engagement remains as strong as ever. Atheists are therefore free to study the OT because they can and, to be crude, it is something to keep one busy with until retirement. If this sounds decadent to some readers, note that the tone of expression here is not flippant. Many atheists have had to resign themselves to the existential ennui that there just do not seem to be much more to life than that. Hence atheist OT scholars like myself choose to stay in the guild, with mixed feelings about the fact that we have to live and work in a

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<sup>38</sup> Berlinerblau, "The Unspeakable in Biblical Scholarship," n.p.

<sup>39</sup> See Jaco W. Gericke, "The 'Died-Again Christian' Syndrome: Its Etiology as Manifested among Fundamentalist Students of the Old Testament in South Africa," *NGTT* 47/3-4 (2006): 477-488.

religiously-saturated and generally oblivious capitalist society where for the foreseen future there will be a market for whatever it is that we think we are doing.

## F CONCLUSION

In this article a closer look was taken at the phenomenon of atheism as it is manifested within the study of the OT. It was demonstrated by way of a brief introduction to the problematic that atheism is an already extant albeit now more overtly emergent contingency within the field of biblical scholarship that remains mostly marginalised. Several varieties and of atheism and atheistic approaches to the Bible are currently operative amongst interpreters of the OT and will continue to do so for the foreseen future. Several pros and cons attach themselves to the existence of the fourth paradigm and those working in it enter from a variety of backgrounds and work with a number of different agendas in mind. Whether this state of affairs will be officially acknowledged and publicly tolerated by religious communities, or whether secular biblical criticism has a future in the greater South African academic context remain to be seen. At least the matter is quite controversial and gives us something to argue about ... for now. And who's to say there is more to research than finding something out of the ordinary to write about next?

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