

# Locke's Biblical Critique

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper seeks to clarify the relationship between Locke's political and religious thought. To the extent that Locke's political thought is an outgrowth of a particular strand of Christianity, its claims to universality would be significantly diminished. This would be the case, however, only if Locke were genuinely religious. Plausible accounts of his religiosity have been offered by Dunn, Waldron, et al., but such accounts become implausible given the presence of a biblical critique within the Two Treatises. The evidence for a critique of the Bible on moral grounds pointed to by Strauss, Pangle, et al. is ambiguous, however, and so fails to refute the pious-Locke hypothesis. This paper argues that close attention to Locke's analysis of the Hebrew text of Gen. 1:28 unambiguously points to a critique of the Bible on textual grounds. This serves to set the moral critique upon firmer foundations, to imply that the moral critique really is present in the text, and to reestablish the universalist claims of Locke's political thought.

Do John Locke's politics rest upon a theological foundation?<sup>1</sup> John Dunn, Jeremy Waldron, and others say yes.<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, Thomas Pangle, Michael Zuckert, and others say no.<sup>3</sup> This is not a small question, since we rightly want to know whether liberal democracy (which is roughly Lockean) can be exported to countries that do not possess a Christian heritage. For a time, the Pope condemned liberal democracy as being incompatible with Christianity, so one might wonder if in fact it is an outgrowth only of Protestant theology. The People's Republic of China rejects "rights discourse" as narrowly "Western." Nietzsche saw "secular" Europe as the post-Christian working out of Christian moral commitments.<sup>4</sup> Carl Schmitt affirmed that it was merely the secularization of submerged theological concepts.<sup>5</sup> Condemnations of the "secular" West in the Ummah do not mean to imply the universality of the Western political tradition; on the contrary, it is claimed that liberal democracy rests upon a *particular* world view, one incompatible with Islam and hence mistaken.

At the same time, some exuberant defenders of Locke's piety and its influence upon his political thought hope to move the United States in a more pietistic direction by demonstrating

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical references point to the *Two Treatises of Government* by treatise and section; sometimes line numbers in Peter Laslett's edition are indicated; see John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, student edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> See John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Greg Forster, *John Locke's Political of Moral Consensus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Alex Tuckness, "The Coherence of a Mind," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (January 1999): 73–90; Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); John Yolton, "Locke on the Law of Nature," *Philosophical Review* 67, no. 4 (October 1958): 477–98.

<sup>3</sup> See Patrick Coby, "The Law of Nature in Locke's *Second Treatise*," *Review of Politics* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 3–28; Ross Corbett, *The Lockean Commonwealth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Richard Cox, *Locke on War and Peace* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960); C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); Harvey Mansfield, "On the Political Character of Property in Locke," in *Powers, Possessions and Freedom*, ed. Alkis Kontos, 23–38 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Michael Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1966; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (1985; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

this linkage. Thomas West, for example, argues in favor of Locke's theism in order to rebut Zuckert's claim that the Lockeanism of the American Puritan clergy at the time of the Revolution reflected a secularization of American society. Because Locke was a theologian, West claims, his influence cannot be considered a secularization.<sup>6</sup>

Locke seems to make a claim to universality, however—a universality presumably compatible with the religious toleration advocated in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, one that extends even to pagans and idolaters. The universality of Locke's political thought—and hence his status as the *philosophic* progenitor of liberal democracy—is threatened by arguments that would condemn or celebrate both him and liberal democracy as mere manifestations of a particular religious heritage.

The arguments put forward in the debates over Locke's religious thought are plausible only if one already accepts the conclusions they are supposed to support, however. Locke does say things that sound pious. The law of nature is the law of God, for example. Equality results from our being the workmanship of one God. God judges adherence to the law of nature. It is God who forbids a man to neglect his own preservation. What a man learns by reason is simply what one would learn by consulting revelation. Locke's later writings are almost entirely theological; witness *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*. How do we know these things are not a pious façade? Scholars who are persuaded of Locke's sincere piety argue that we can construct an account of Locke's theology and they are satisfied that a pious person could hold such a theology.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas West, "The Transformation of Protestant Theology as a Condition of the American Revolution," 187–223, in *Protestantism and the American Founding*, ed. Thomas S. Engeman and Michael P. Zuckert (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

The interpretation of this evidence can be questioned, however. In saying that we learn the same thing whether we consult reason or revelation, the effect of Locke's statement is to replace appeals to revelation with reasoned argumentation, it is urged. One must not understate the importance of the fact that the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was prompted by a rejection of traditional natural law theology. The theology of the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Paraphrase and Notes* is a watered-down Christianity; the intention of both works is instead to transform or corrupt, not purify, Christianity so that it is safe for liberal democracy. Locke's discussions of the biblical God demonstrate the distance between the authentic biblical teaching and Locke's own rational politics. How, then, do we know that the things that Locke says are not authentically pious? Scholars who argue these points are not satisfied that a deeply serious thinker could hold to the theology that is attributed to him and that he sometimes seems to support. Locke's theology is unworthy of Locke, a statement that rests upon a divination of what a serious theology must look like.

In both cases, the question turns on whether we find Locke's theology satisfying. Now, this is without doubt the more important question, but it does not advance the discussion concerning what *Locke himself* thought. Both sides begin with the supposition that Locke's thought is reasonable, but disagree when it comes to what is in fact reasonable. It is quite possible that Locke was not simply wise. In any case, such arguments require that *we* be wise, at least when it comes to theological issues.

The presence of a biblical critique within the *Two Treatises* would certainly invalidate the pious-Locke hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> The problem arises in finding evidence that incontrovertibly points to the presence of such a critique. While evidence for the incompatibility between Locke's thought and authentic Christian belief has been presented in a variety of different ways, the primary argument that Locke's *First Treatise* is actually a theologico-political treatise takes the form of discovering within it a moral critique of religion. This does not rise to the level of incontrovertibility, however, for the evidence that points toward such a critique establishes only that Locke was either irreligious or that he was incoherent, but it does not enable us to decide between the two.

So, for example, Pangle's Locke objects that the biblical God casts man into a world where he needs to labor in order to survive but forbids or discourages the most productive means toward that survival (viz. eating meat, farming, acquisitiveness in general). The biblical God commands submission to the patriarchal family, while the rational family is not patriarchal. The doctrine of original sin itself is morally grotesque. In short, the biblical God is a monster. At the same time, however, the personal experiences of the pious suggest the importance and even centrality of divine justice to their experience of the divine. It is their experiences, and perhaps similar ones of our own, that make us willing to take the Bible seriously in the first place. An unjust God, then, can be no God at all; ancient tales that suggest we must

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<sup>7</sup> Even though several competing and incompatible theologies have been attributed to Locke in attempts to make sense of what he says, such that we must speak of pious-Locke hypotheses, in the plural, I will refer to them as a group since they share the common characteristic of denying that Locke's piety was as deep as a coat of paint.

subordinate our rational sense of justice to divine authority can thus be known to be false. This is what Pangle says Locke argues.<sup>8</sup>

The question remains, however, whether Locke applied (or meant the reader to apply) what he says about justice to the actions he attributes to God. Moreover, that such a moral critique is present in Locke's text seems to be persuasive only to those who find the moral critique itself persuasive. Those willing to insist that even God's justice is mysterious, on the other hand, or those who just don't care about religious truth tend not to see the evidence to which Pangle points. They could retort that Locke wrestled with the justice of God and so that is why God might not always seem to some to come off well.

The evidence that *could* decide the plausibility of the pious-Locke hypothesis is likely to be arcane. The evidence this paper presents certainly is. The evidence for a biblical critique within the *Two Treatises* is arcane for three reasons. First, precisely if such a critique is concealed it will be difficult to see, though not impossible. Second, even if such a critique were stated openly, serious biblical critiques in general are arcane things. Third, a reason peculiar to us, the evidence in this case requires some knowledge of Hebrew.

Evidence of the sort that I am talking about must be such that it is incompatible with the pious-Locke hypothesis. Demonstrating this fact requires that I first attempt to interpret it in line with that hypothesis. Only then it is appropriate to go through the other interpretation. As a result, I will address some passages more than once.

Locke's reading of Gen. 1:28 in chapter four of the *First Treatise* is heterodox and peculiar to him (a fact that so far as I know has not been noted before).<sup>9</sup> It must be taken

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<sup>8</sup> Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*.

seriously, then, whether one adheres to the pious-Locke hypothesis or not, insofar as men do not generally publish potential heresies if they are not committed to them in some way. If Locke was pious, a heterodox interpretation highlights a problem to which he had given some serious reflection. It would reveal theological questions he thought worth taking seriously. It is impossible, however, to maintain the thesis that Locke came to this heterodox interpretation of Gen. 1:28 out of sincere piety in the face of what Locke actually says. Instead, Locke's procedure in the beginning of chapter four undermines the idea that the Bible can be interpreted sensibly without recourse to moral knowledge that we possess independently of the Bible. Orthodoxy of the sort that Locke occasionally insists upon, where our moral and political opinions are submitted entirely to the test of biblical approval, is not a sustainable position given the Bible's actual text.

### ***Locke's Typological Thesis Regarding Gen. 1:28***

One of Filmer's arguments that there never was a state of nature is that God gave everything to Adam, and so the equality purported to exist in a state of nature is a heretical fiction. Such an assertion would clearly pose a problem to Locke's political arguments, since it would be difficult to persuade men of a state of nature argument if it were manifestly to contradict the biblical account. There is, then, a clear need for Locke to rebut this argument.

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<sup>9</sup> Most accounts of the *Two Treatises* skip over it without mention. Dunn says only that Filmer's argument from Gen. 1:28 "is subjected to the most withering (and interminable) criticism in the *First Treatise*;" see *Political Thought of John Locke*, 68. Waldron's treatment of Locke's discussion of Gen. 1:28 skips immediately to the question of whether the verse was addressed to Adam and Eve together rather, saying nothing about *what* that verse granted in the first place; see *God, Locke, and Equality*, 24–25. Pangle and Zuckert each devote about a page to the opening of chapter four, but do not suggest that it is particularly heterodox; see Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 141; Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism*, 132.

Locke initially quibbles over whether Filmer meant that Adam merely owned everything or that Adam was also given kingship over everything in Gen. 1:28 (I 23), consonant with his later argument that property does not imply political dominion (cf. I 41–43). Locke moves on, however, saying he will examine both possibilities (I 24). First, he will show that God granted no power over other human beings in Gen. 1:28. Then he will show that God did not give Adam any particular property but rather that the donation was to the entire species. It is the first of these that has our attention.

### **Initial statement of the typology, I 25**

Locke’s argument is at once straightforward: “all positive Grants convey no more than the express words they are made in will carry,” and the wording of Gen. 1:28 simply does not cover human beings (I 25). That verse reads, in the King James translation, “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

This seems to be a problem, for the King James translation might give the impression that the grant does indeed cover human beings, insofar as Adam was given dominion over “every living thing that moveth.” Human beings are of course living things that move. So Locke mentions a problem with the translation, deriving from the fact that the verse should conclude “every living thing that *creepeth* upon the earth.”

The words in Hebrew for “living thing that creepeth” are *ḥayah ha-romeset*, Locke tells us, “of which words the Scripture it self is the best interpreter.” And, as appears from Gen. 1:24–25, he assures us, these are technical terms. “Let the Earth bring forth the living Creature



after his kind; Cattle and creeping thing, and beast of the Earth, after his kind, and God made the Beast of the Earth after his kind, and Cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth on the Earth after his kind.” So, the brute inhabitants of the earth are called “living creatures,” and these are split into three categories, Locke says: cattle (which can be tamed and thus owned), wild beasts, and creeping things, i.e., reptiles. The word for wild beast, Locke informs us, just happens to be the word for a living thing, *ḥayah*, and the word for creeping thing is *ha-romeset*. So the phrase in question, *ḥayah ha-romeset*, he concludes, should not have been translated by the King James as a noun followed by a relative clause at all (“living thing that creepeth,” let alone “living thing that moveth”) but instead as a list (“wild beast and reptile”). And this is how this verse is understood by the Septuagint, Locke says.

That is, all of creation is divided into categories and the donation in Gen. 1:28 must be read in light of these categories. On the fifth day God created the fish and the birds. On the sixth day, prior to the creation of man, He created the brute inhabitants of the earth, comprising the cattle, the wild beasts, and the reptiles. Looking to the wording of Gen. 1:28, the donation is in these same terms: fish of the sea, fowl of the air, wild beasts, and reptiles, none of which include human beings.

### **An objection to the typology, I 26**

Given this argument, it might not be immediately clear why Locke must continue with I 26–28. This perplexity stems from the fact that I 26 lays out Locke’s response to an objection without rendering that objection explicit. Upon reflection, in light of what Locke argues in I 26, however, the problem with the argument of I 25 becomes clear. After all, on Locke’s reading, and *only on Locke’s reading*, God has not given mankind dominion over the cattle, that is, over

the very things that a man can own, that are good to eat, and that can be used as beasts of burden! And, again on Locke's reading alone, when God considered making man in Gen. 1:26, He intended to give them the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, the cattle, and the reptiles, which is to say, not the wild beasts which He later gave them!

Locke resolves this difficulty by averring, "God certainly executed in one place what he declares he designed in another" (I 26). Presumably, though Locke does not say so, this logic works in reverse, as well: we should read God's declaration of His intention in Gen. 1:26 in light of his actions in Gen. 1:28. Of course, one might wonder why the Bible would express the intention and the action differently if they were the same. It seems that letting Scripture be the interpreter of Scripture would instead suggest that, if the words are different, the meaning is different, and that we must discover the reason for that difference.

In any event, Locke sticks to his story. Despite the fact that on his reading Gen. 1:28 does not grant dominion over the useful animals, even though it was God's stated intention to have done so, he reiterates that we

"have here only an account, how the Terrestrial irrational Animals, which were already created and reckon'd up at their Creation, in three distinct Ranks of *Cattle, Wild Beasts, and Reptils* were here, *ver. 28.* actually put under the Dominion of Man, as they were designed *ver. 26.* nor do these words contain in them the least appearance of any thing, that can be wrested, to signifie God's giving to one Man Dominion over another, *Adam* over his Posterity" (I 26).

## Locke's interpretation as idiosyncratic and heterodox

It bears emphasizing that the textual difficulty with which Locke grapples in I 26 is a problem only for Locke. The King James version does not translate Gen. 1:26 or Gen. 1:28 as though referring back to the categories established in Gen. 1:20–25. Nor does the Bishop's Bible of 1568 ("every living thing that moveth"), nor the Geneva Bible of 1587 ("every beast that moveth"). Nor does the Vulgate (*animatibus quae moventur*).<sup>10</sup> Nor does any modern translation, so far as I am aware, even those that offer critical footnotes to explain alternate renderings and textual difficulties. Looking to the first-century translator Onkelos and to the medieval commentator Rashi, we cannot say that Locke is struggling with something that had puzzled a tradition that is willing to interpret even spelling irregularities (as Rashi does here over a missing *vav* in the word for "and subdue it").

The Septuagint, to which Locke points us and claims as a source, does demonstrate some discomfort with the text. Its discomfort, however, is with the difference between Gen. 1:26 and Gen. 1:28. It resolves this simply by repeating the list from Gen. 1:26 in the donation of Gen. 1:28 without regard for the wording of the latter. Now, this calls, into question Locke's claim that the Septuagint supports his translation of *hayah ha-romeset*, since it does not seem to be translating that phrase at all. The word which Locke tells us translates *hayah* in Gen. 1:24–25, θηρία, does not appear in the Septuagint's translation of either Gen. 1:26 or Gen. 1:28. (in both, ἀρχέτωσαν τῶν ἰχθύων τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῶν κτηνῶν καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἑρπετῶν τῶν ἑρπόντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). The Septuagint is not in the

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<sup>10</sup> Locke's suggestion that the words *hayah ha-romeset* translate into Latin as *bestiam reptantem* reflects other contemporary Latin translations, but absent a word for *and* we cannot say that these intended the participle *reptantem* to be taken as a noun rather than as an adjective modifying *bestiam*.

least concerned to establish that God's donation be in the categories established in Gen. 1:20–25. It does not even translate the word for “cattle” (*behemah*) consistently, rendering it τετράπους in Gen. 1:24 and κτήνος in Gen 1:25, 26, and 28, so different are its concerns from Locke's.

Most importantly, Locke is just wrong. *Hayah ha-romeset* is unmistakably a noun followed by a relative clause, which is why every single translation renders it as such (again, the Septuagint does not render this at all). In order to read “beast and reptile” the words would have to be *hayah v'remes*. (Actually, in order for Locke's typological thesis to be correct, they would have to be *hayat ha-aretz v'ha-remes*, but more on that later.)

There is, then, no avoiding the conclusion that Locke's reading is the heterodox one, the novel one, and a wrong one, so it is important to recognize that he is committed to defending it even when it gets him into further difficulties (as in I 26). We must wonder why.

### **Locke's heterodox interpretation as motivated by the deepest piety**

We cannot attribute Locke's novel argument here to an immediate political desire to refute Filmer, as this heterodox interpretation is not necessary to the refutation of Filmer. His friend, James Tyrrell, knew that “every living thing that creepeth” cannot refer to human beings since humans do not “creep” anymore than they “slither” or “canter,” in Hebrew as in English.<sup>11</sup> Locke knew Hebrew, and moreover it is likely that he read *Patriarcha non Monarcha* as soon as it came out in 1681. He bought a copy of it for Tyrrell, which, if Laslett is correct that this

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<sup>11</sup> James Tyrrell, *Patriarcha non Monarcha*, chap. 1 [pp. 14–15 of version 5 Online Library of Liberty EBook PDF created for Portable Library of Liberty]

suggests that Locke did not know who its author was,<sup>12</sup> at least demonstrates that he thought it worth reading.

We must then wonder why Locke would not rest satisfied with this argument. This wonder might be lessened if we recognize one objection to which Tyrrell's argument is vulnerable and the theological orientation from which that objection issues. To say that *ramas* (the verb from which *ha-romeset* is formed) cannot apply to human beings seems to beg the question. For, how do we know that it cannot apply to human beings? Such an argument should appeal to the word's use in Scripture. But, then, if Gen. 1:28 *does* include human beings, must we not change our understanding of *ramas*? I do not know if this argument was actually made in print in reply to Tyrrell, but it is one that might have occurred to someone who was seriously pious, actually attempting to live according to Scripture and willing, should Scripture be sufficiently clear, to sacrifice even their most cherished political commitments. That is, this argument would occur to someone *deeply interested in knowing* whether Filmer is right or wrong about Gen. 1:28, someone not willing to cease inquiry as soon as they found a merely *plausible* answer that they happened to like.

So, let us pursue this possibility—that Locke desires to know for certain that *ramas* cannot include human beings and so for this reason hews to his position that the Bible speaks consistently in the categories established in Gen. 1:20–25, describing the work of the fifth and sixth days prior to the creation of man, despite the difficulties this causes for him and that he must resolve in I 26. A problem with this possibility is that Locke does not need to say that the categories announced in Gen. 1:20–25 are preserved in Gen. 1:26 and 28 in order to show that

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises of Government*, 60n.

*ramas*, and thus *ḥayah ha-romeset*, is inapplicable to human beings. Locke, moreover, knows this, pointing us to the appropriate evidence. He *does* point to how the word is used in Scripture, unlike Tyrrell. Even if he is wrong about the precise meaning of the words, he concedes (presumably his identification of *behemah* with animals that can be tamed and thus owned, *ḥayah* with specifically *wild* beasts, and *ha-romeset* with reptiles), “they cannot be supposed to comprehend Man, [...] especially since that *Hebrew* word *remes* [...] is so plainly used in contradistinction to him,” citing Gen. 6:20, 7:14, 7:21, 7:23, 8:17, and 8:19 (I 27). So Locke’s motivation seems to be *more* than simply to establish the same point as Tyrrell makes, namely, that *ramas* cannot be used in conjunction with human beings.

What motivates Locke’s heterodox interpretation, where Gen. 1:26 and 28 speak the same language as Gen. 1:20–25, then, seems to be that interpretation itself. What we get in I 25–27 is his pursuit of this thesis. Locke is certain that “all positive Grants convey no more than the express words they are made in will carry,” that Gen. 1:28 is a positive grant, and that he must look to Scripture as “the best interpreter” of what those express words will carry. The best interpretation is that “which best agrees with the plain construction of the words, and arises from the obvious meaning of the place” (I 32). “God, I believe, speaks differently from Men, because he speaks with more Truth, more Certainty; but when he vouchsafes to speak to Men, I do not think, he speaks differently from them, in crossing the Rules of language in use amongst them” (I 46). Locke is also certain that the Bible is listing the kinds of creatures that there are, it being emphasized that the “living creatures” are to be brought forth after their kinds, the cattle after its kind, the beast of the earth after its kind, and everything that creeps upon the earth after its kind. The Bible itself presents a typology of the fifth and sixth days’ creations.

Locke is driven, it seems at this point, by the conviction that the Bible preserves these categories in subsequent grants. This is necessary, for otherwise God would not be clear about what He is granting at the very moment that He grants it, and thus display an ignorance of the basic requirements of communication. This might be acceptable regarding His own ineffable attributes, but it would be perverse when it came to His expectations from us (this grant is phrased in the imperative), like Caligula writing his laws in small letters atop high columns. Yet faith in His promises relies upon the trust that those promises were competently communicated. Doubting that God is clear when our reliance upon Him requires that he be clear is to overturn all faith whatsoever. We can say, provisionally, that Locke's idiosyncratic, heterodox, and ultimately indefensible translation of *ḥayah ha-romeset* seems motivated by an attempt to avoid this result.

There seems to be nothing subversive about the opening gambit of chapter four, then. Pangle sees here "an impressively sober and conservative" beginning, and can reconcile this with his thesis that the *First Treatise* is actually Locke's theologico-political treatise only by suggesting that Locke begins this way in order to establish his pious bona fides with some, while preparing others to be suitably shocked when he abandons this pious approach to Scripture in giving his own spin on the commandment to be fruitful and multiply in I 33.<sup>13</sup> If anything, Locke's procedure here is *too* pious for Pangle's thesis, it being neither sober nor conservative but radical, and its radicalism seems promoted by a sincere desire to interpret the Bible.

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<sup>13</sup> Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 141–42.

## ***Locke Pushes the Typological Thesis Past the Breaking Point***

Locke's attempt to interpret the Bible according to Scripture alone runs into an insuperable problem. To see why, let us consider his continuation of the argument in I 27–28.

### **The donation to Noah and the problem of cannibalism, I 27**

To prove that the Bible does actually continue to speak in terms of the “kinds” mentioned in Gen. 1:25, Locke turns to God's renewal of His donation to Noah and his sons following the flood in Gen. 9. These words, *hayah* and *ha-romes*, appear again, Locke assures us, in the phrase “every moving (sic) thing, that moveth upon the Earth,” paralleling exactly Gen. 1:28.<sup>14</sup> And we know that these cannot include mankind, since this grant was plainly made to Noah and his sons together.

“By all which it is plain, that God's Donation to *Adam*, *Ch.* 1. 28. and his designation, *v.* 26. and his Grant again to *Noah* and his Sons, refer to, and contain in them, neither more nor less, than the Works of the Creation the *5th* day, and the Beginning of the *6th*, as they are set down from the *20th*, to the *26th ver.* inclusively of the *1st Chap.* and so comprehend all the Species of irrational Animals of the *Terraqueous Globe.*”

This is Locke's conclusion, *even though* this requires that he now concede that “all the words whereby they are expressed in the History of their Creation, are no where used in any of the following Grants, but some of them omitted in one, and some in another” (I 27).

This is a stunning admission, and one wonders how Locke is to reconcile this with his statement about what positive grants convey and his repeated insistence upon the plain

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<sup>14</sup> The verse actually reads “every *living* thing, that moveth upon the Earth;” it is quoted correctly at *I.* 39.



meaning of the words. It must mean that while God *intended* to use all these words, He did not, or, just as troublesome, He did but the Bible is not a trustworthy record of His actions.

If anything, given this problem, should not Locke have abandoned his thesis that Gen. 1:20–25 establishes the sorts of things there are in the world (other than man) and that the Bible speaks consistently in these terms? Should he not have yielded on the proper translation of *ḥayah ha-romeset*, allowing that it really does mean “living thing that creepeth,” as everyone else who has looked at those words has immediately recognized?

This seems especially poignant as Locke now (and only now) makes it clear that *ramas* is used in contradistinction to humanity. In Gen. 7:21, one of the verses he cites in support of this, it is clear that *ramas* can be applied to *everything other than* human beings, including the cattle and even the birds, not just the *remes* (creeping thing), everything Locke would want to have been granted in Gen. 1:28. So, working solely off of what Locke knows, there is no *need* for Gen. 1:28 to refer back to the typology of Gen. 1:20–25. Every *ḥayah ha-romeset* would mean every non-human thing that is alive. There would be no problematic omission of the cattle from Gen. 1:28, and thus no need for Locke to say that the grant there must mean more than it plainly says. Moreover, this verse (and the others Locke cites in I 27 to support the claim that *ramas* is used in contradistinction to humanity) demonstrates plainly that it is not simply a technical term that refers solely to the reptiles.

Locke still has not exhausted his arguments. He ends I 27,

“methinks Sir *Robert* should have carried his Monarchical Power one step higher, and satisfied the World, that Princes might eat their Subjects too, since God gave as full Power to *Noah* and his Heirs, *Chap. 9. 2.* to eat *every Living thing that moveth*, as he did

to *Adam* to have Dominion over them, the *Hebrew* words in both places being the same” (I 27).

And there it is. If one accepts Filmer’s reading of Gen. 1:28, one accepts cannibalism. The Bible becomes morally repugnant if one does not accept Locke’s understanding of it.

This is, however, a rather odd thing for Locke to claim, given the deeply pious claims he has made and will continue to make concerning biblical hermeneutics. The problem is not that he is maligning Filmer here, but rather that he is breaking the canons of interpretation upon which he insists in order to malign Filmer. “The Prejudices of our own ill grounded Opinions, however by us called *Probable* cannot Authorize us to understand Scripture contrary to the direct and plain meaning of the Words,” he says (I 36). He appears to have taken these canons rather seriously. At the very least, the argument that Locke makes but that Tyrrell does not make (namely, that Gen. 1:28 is best understood to refer to the “kinds” enumerated in Gen. 1:20–25) seems comprehensible only if Locke were trying more genuinely than Tyrrell to follow these canons.

While the Bible clearly condemns murder (although if Filmer is correct it is not clear that a king could ever “murder” his subjects), its treatment of cannibalism is more that it is a ghoulish necessity that presses itself upon those in the most terrible of conditions and that God will visit that necessity upon Israel as punishment for its sins (Lev. 26:29, Deut. 28:53–57, Jer. 19:9, Ezek. 5:10). These verses do not say that Israel will warrant even further punishment for this, nor do they threaten in general that Israel will be led to commit further sins as a punishment for its sins. For example, they do not say that Israel will be so desperate that it will

trap and eat the birds of prey or dogs that the siege will attract, things that *are* expressly forbidden.

That is, Locke here interprets the Bible according to what we know—or rather what we are resolutely certain—is the correct moral teaching rather than according to what it says. Did he slip up, here? How could he not have noticed that he was no longer being guided by the plain words of Scripture in making this claim?

Of course, our incredulity at Locke’s failure to notice a thing is not conclusive evidence that he did in fact notice that thing. What is certain is that at this point Locke is interpreting the Bible in a way that can be exploited by the moral critique. He has left aside the interpretive modes that seem immune to that critique, and he will continue to do so throughout the rest of the *Two Treatises*.

### **The typological thesis is alien to the Bible, I 28**

In the next section, the last devoted to the question of whether the donation of Gen. 1:28 includes human beings before moving on to the question of whether that grant was made to Adam alone or to all mankind, or at least just to Adam and Eve jointly, Locke’s thesis that the Bible continues to speak in terms of the “kinds” enumerated in Gen. 1:20–25 recedes. David lists the things over which God granted dominion: “all Sheep and oxen and the Beasts of the Field, and the Fowl of the Air, and Fish of the Sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the Sea” (I 28; cf. Ps. 8:8–9). Locke limits his point to the fact that none of these can be taken to signify man, and thus that there was no “Monarchical Power of one Man over another” granted by Gen. 1:28. Crucially, David does not here speak in the terms Locke had identified as crucial. “Beasts of the Field” (*bahamot sadei*) is built off of the term Locke had identified as “cattle”

(*behemah*), so the Psalm would cover only various kinds of cattle, birds, and sea creatures, if we were to follow Locke's typological thesis.

If anything, Locke concludes his argument with a text that refutes the original argument that he had to make, after having brought that argument to a point that it seems untenable, and after having engaged in the sort of interpretation that he has and will continue to decry. The only thing that can save the pious-Locke hypothesis is that he simply failed to notice these problems.

### ***Tearing Away the Veil***

Let us assume that Locke has prompted someone to open the Bible at some point during his discussion. This seems a reasonable assumption. Locke is advancing a novel interpretation, and only someone who did not know what the Bible said, did not care, and/or assumed that the author of the *Two Treatises* was either incompetent to interpret the Bible or himself did not care what it said could fail to be piqued by this interpretation. Locke, moreover, practically tells us to get it out, as his argument is somewhat difficult to follow unless one has the text in front of them. Let us not, then, accept what Locke tells us about the Bible, and especially what it says in the original Hebrew, and instead turn to it ourselves.

Looking to the Bible itself, Locke's argument seems much more problematic even than I have just described. It is not simply his typological thesis that is in trouble, but his presentation itself.

Locke concludes I 27 by saying that Noah and his sons were granted permission in Gen. 9:2 to eat "every Living thing that moveth," these being the same words as appear in Gen. 1:28.

This is inaccurate, and probing that inaccuracy suggests that it is either a lie or that Locke has abandoned his argument, made just two sections earlier, that *ḥayah ha-romeset* is best understood as “wild beast and reptile.”

Opening up the King James, we find that Gen. 9:3 (the only verse Locke can be referring to) instead reads, “every moving thing that liveth.” Of course, if we accept that *ḥayah ha-romeset* is a noun followed by a relative clause, as every translator does (and, as a reminder, the only way to take the Hebrew), they do refer to the same thing: *every living thing that creeps* is the same as *every creeping thing that lives*. Tyrrell tells us that both verses refer to the same thing. But Locke has argued that it is wrong to take *ḥayah ha-romeset* as a noun followed by a relative clause; Tyrrell has not. Tyrrell can therefore say that they are the same thing; Locke cannot.

Locke tells us to look to the Hebrew words, that the Hebrew words are the same in both places (I 27 ll. 40–41). He implies that they are the same words as he says appear in Gen. 9:2, *ḥayah* and *ha-romes* (cf. I 27 ll. 1–9). He might even be said to more than imply this, as he claims that the grant to eat food *is* in Gen. 9:2 (I 27 l. 39—he knows better at I 27 l. 10, where he also suggests that only *remes* is mentioned in the grant to eat food). In any event, the relevant passage from Gen. 9:3 reads *remes asher hu ḥai*. These are quite simply different words, if words formed off of the same roots. *Ḥai* cannot here refer to wild beasts, however, it unmistakably being the verb “live.”

So, while Locke’s interpretation of Gen. 1:28 requires that we take the relative clause *ha-romeset* to instead be a noun, his reading of Gen. 9:3 requires the verb *ḥai* to be a noun, neither of which is permissible. One might perhaps speculate, if one wished to salvage the

pious-Locke hypothesis by impugning Locke's command of Hebrew, that he was taken in by Spinoza, who in his *Hebrew Grammar* claimed that every verb can be a noun and every noun a verb.<sup>15</sup> Aside from the dark suggestion that Locke's guide to the Bible is Spinoza, it seems that Locke could not have taken this advice concerning Gen. 9:3, at least. *Ha-* is the definite pronoun, and one can construct relative clauses by placing it in front of a verb; this might make someone taken in by Spinoza think that such a verb is actually a noun. There would still be the problem of the missing *and* required to make *ḥayah ha-romeset* into "wild beast *and* reptile," but such an error is more plausible than attributing Locke's parallel error regarding Gen. 9:3 to this cause. This is because *asher hu* unmistakably introduces a relative clause, and so *remes asher hu ḥai* cannot possibly mean "reptile and wild beast," even accepting Spinoza's slip or deception regarding Hebrew grammar.

Errors such as these are unlikely. So, either Locke is now interpreting Gen. 1:28 in the same way as everyone else, having abandoned his own typological argument, or he is misleading us about the text of Gen. 9:3 (he certainly does so regarding the English, the only question being whether he intends to do so regarding the Hebrew, as well). Or, both are possible.

Prior to this point, Locke had been telling a host of lies, albeit small ones, in order to make his thesis that *ḥayah ha-romeset* in Gen. 1:28 refers to the "kinds" enumerated in Gen. 1:24–25 seem more plausible. It now seems worth nothing them. As noted above, while he does not quote the Hebrew words used in Gen. 9:3, he at the very least implies that these are the same ones as used in Gen. 9:2 for wild beast and reptiles, which he lists as *ḥayah* and *ha-*

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<sup>15</sup> Spinoza, "Hebrew Grammar," 584–675, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), chapter 5, 599–600.

*romes*. The latter is actually *tirmos*, as in *kol asher tirmos ha-adamah*, “everything that creeps upon the earth,” while the former is *ḥayat ha-aretz*. *Ḥayah* can be used to mean a wild beast, as Locke says, but on its own it means simply a living thing; the more common term for wild beast is literally “living thing of the land,” *ḥayat ha-aretz*, which we find here. Similarly, Locke says that Gen. 1:24–25, upon which he relies for saying that the brute inhabitants of the earth are divided into three “kinds,” use the word *ḥayah* for wild beast (I 25), when they too use the phrase *ḥayat ha-aretz* (or, the same things, *ḥaito-eretz*). He also suggests that these verses use *ha-romeset* for the third rank of creatures, the reptiles (I 25); the actual word is *remes*. I have already remarked on his falsifications regarding the Septuagint.

Now, all of these falsification make it more plausible that *ḥayah ha-romeset* should be taken to mean “wild beast and reptile,” but at the same time, once they are noticed, they reveal how utterly *implausible* Locke’s suggestion actually is. While I have been giving Locke the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that he was led to his impossible position as a result of an honest error, driven by a pious desire that the biblical text be amenable to the sort of interpretive methods that submission to that text would require, it is impossible to maintain that Locke’s errors were honest.<sup>16</sup> Especially in light of his abandonment of his typological thesis to say that Gen. 9:3 and Gen. 1:28 refer to the same thing (cf. I 27), we cannot say that Locke believes in this thesis. We are faced then with the inescapable conclusion that Locke

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<sup>16</sup> There are other errors which might have seemed to have been honest, but which are called into doubt by the fact that other inaccuracies are the result of deliberate alteration. Locke’s confusion of Gen. 9:2 and 9:3 is one example. He misquotes Gen. 1:28 to read, “every moving thing, that moveth upon the Earth” (I 27 l. 6). He omits “and hast crowned him with glory and honor” from Psalm 8 (I 28 l. 6)—clearly, “crowned” has too many monarchical implications for Locke to report the Bible correctly here, but his omission instead shows that the authentic teaching of the Bible is not as hostile toward monarchy as Locke says it reasonably should be.

presents in I 25 and defends in I 26 and the beginning of I 27 an interpretation of the Bible in which he does not believe.

More than this: he *creates* an interpretation in which he does not believe, a heterodox interpretation, and advances it only to abandon it. One might claim that someone unable to attain or maintain the austere saintliness required to interpret the Bible in the light of the Bible alone, refusing to bend Scripture to their own prejudices however cherished, might mouth the canons of interpretation while in practice departing from them, occasionally making claims that are supported solely by their cherished prejudices. Even the pious might slip when it comes to defending an interpretation to which they are attached. But it cannot be claimed that a genuinely pious individual would suffer from this regarding an interpretation to which they are not at all attached—not just to defend an interpretation in which they do not believe, let alone one that is not supported by the authorities, but to *lie* in order to defend an unpopular interpretation in which they do not believe. It cannot be claimed that a genuinely pious individual would act as Locke acts in I 25–28.

### ***Locke's Trap***

By the end of chapter four, Locke is interpreting the Bible entirely in the light of his own moral reasoning. Indeed, the contrast with the beginning of the chapter is striking. After concluding his textual case that Gen. 1:28 gave no political power (I 40), he entertains the possibility that the grant of property contained in it could be parlayed into political power by threatening all those who did not submit with starvation (I 41). If one could parlay property into political power in this way, Locke says, “it would be a good Argument to prove, that there was



never any such *Property*, that God never gave any such *Private Dominion*" (I 41 // 10–12). His evidence for this is not any biblical verse, but instead his judgment of what would be "more reasonable to think" God would do, given that He "bid Mankind increase and multiply" (// 13–14). But we further know, Locke says, that it is impossible to parlay property into political power in this way. More than this, "we know God hath not left one Man so to the Mercy of another" (I 42 // 1–2). This, too, Locke does not establish on the basis of Scripture, not even with a nod in that general direction, but instead upon his own arguments concerning justice and charity (// 11–15).

In the middle of chapter four, when dealing with the claim that Gen. 1:28 was made to Adam alone (I 29–40), Locke at least mixes his pronouncements about what God must demand with references to what purports to be a record of God's communications with mankind. But even there, it is clear that Locke is interpreting those passages in light of what is reasonable, or seems reasonable to him, rather than by Scripture alone. He argues against the subjection of Eve, for example, by asking, "shall we say that God ever made a joint Grant to two, and one only was to have the benefit of it?" (I 29). Locke's conclusive proof that Filmer is mistaken about the extent and character of Noah's dominion is Locke's own judgment that it would be absurd to put off re-peopling the world after the flood for 350 years until Noah had died or to have required that his sons ask him for permission to lie with their wives if this re-peopling were to begin during his lifetime—seeing as Noah himself is not recorded as having contributed to the task with new children of his own (I 33). God cannot have a preference for absolute monarchy, for Locke knows that population growth requires the development of the arts and sciences and these do not flourish under absolute monarchy (I 33). It is daft to think that the

creatures stood in fear only of Noah but not of his sons, so Gen. 9:2 could not have been addressed to him alone (I 34). Locke cannot comprehend that an absolute monarch should be denied the right to eat his property, so the fact that Adam could not eat meat implies that he was no absolute monarch (I 39).

Indeed, only in the first part of the chapter following his introductory remarks, when Locke is addressing the question of whether Gen. 1:28 granted dominion over human beings (I 25–28), does he make even a show of an attempt to submit to the words of Scripture in interpreting Scripture, and there it seems his point was merely to spring a trap for such humble literalism. Locke adopts the canons of interpretation that he does there for no other reason than that one must adopt the premises of one's opponent in order to subject them to a *reductio ad absurdum*.

### **Locke's response to orthodox opposition**

Locke's procedure in the middle and especially at the end of chapter four is vulnerable to an orthodox and eminently respectable objection. In order to interpret the Bible in light of what seems reasonable as he does, one must presume that the Bible is nothing but the word of reason in the form of revelation. Locke's affirming this is an insufficient reply, for it ignores or even denies the possibility that the Bible is supra-rational or that it reveals things that cannot be known by natural reason alone. A revelation that simply repeated natural theology would be superfluous, at least for the best human beings, while perfect beings do nothing superfluous and the Bible claims to be useful for all—indeed, that the beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD and thus that there simply is no “natural” path to genuine wisdom. One cannot meet this

challenge by prefacing one's affirmation that reason is man's "only Star and compass" (I 58) with a scandalous tale of Peruvians eating babies (cf. I 57).

Locke deals with this challenge in several ways. First, and his main strategy, is not to draw attention to this problem so that the careless reader who is amenable to his political project can just go along with the flow of passing pages. But for the demanding reader (or, the demanding reader who is not predisposed to be revolted by Locke's political project) Locke has a dual message. Which message is received depends entirely upon how receptive he is to Locke's ultimate message.

Locke puts submissive literalism to the test in order to show its impossibility. The application of such canons of interpretation as this submission to biblical authority suggests means that Gen. 1:28 should be phrased in clear terms, and we find such terms in Gen. 1:20–25. Yet this submission to Scripture as its own best interpreter requires taking *ḥayah ha-romeset* against its plain meaning. Moreover, even if one is willing to sacrifice a little bit of grammar in order to preserve biblical literalism (even though God does not cross the rules of language when speaking to man), this simply generates a new problem: it would mean that God neglected to grant dominion over the cattle. So, in order to preserve biblical literalism, one must further say that Gen. 1:28 does not mean what it says, but instead presume that God does what He says He intends and that His statements of what He intends are also inaccurate, needing to be read in light of what He does. And the grant to Noah and his sons also doesn't fit the mold that it should, given the canons of biblical literalism, until Locke concludes that *nowhere* in the Bible do the words of God's grants adequately convey the content of those grants.

Locke further makes the Bible appear more coherent than it is, lying about its content such that the above problem is clear and relatively easy to follow. He emphasizes the importance of the Bible's coherence and makes one certain that it simply must be that way—Gen. 1:28 simply must speak in the categories established in Gen. 1:20–25, lest it be vague where clarity is required, such as in positive grants. He builds up this expectation and validates the moral impulse behind it. He thus prepares some readers to be suitably aghast when they turn to the Bible's actual text to verify what he says. Locke has set a trap for those motivated by the deep, orthodox piety he exhibits at the start of chapter four.

### **Locke's promotion of liberal Christianity**

One could say that this *reductio* of biblical literalism is Locke's message to the most probing of his careful readers. It might be objected, however, that this understates Locke's role as a theologian of what would come to be called liberal Christianity. Moreover, for all his rhetoric condemning anything but the most literal interpretation of Scripture, Locke *wants* the Bible to be interpreted in light of moral knowledge, or in light of reason. Might not someone spring Locke's trap and yet still believe, it might be objected, and so might Locke's politics not still be based on principles that reflect belief rather than universal reason? It is this liberal Christianity and not orthodoxy that Steve Forde sees at the root of Locke's politics,<sup>17</sup> so distancing Locke from orthodoxy would not suffice to restore the universalist claims of his political thought. That is, one might grant that Locke writes esoterically, but could not Locke's

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<sup>17</sup> See Steve Forde, "Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (April 2001): 396–409.

intention be to explode biblical literalism precisely in order to free men for a more liberal approach to the Bible?

In favor of this suggestion, Locke does promote a liberal reading of the Bible, at least by deed. One could say that Locke eases readers into this liberal reading at the same time that he springs his trap upon a literal reading. Working backwards through chapter four, one discerns ever less objectionable appeals to our presumed moral knowledge. Perhaps Locke subtly suggests that the only way to make sense of the Bible is by such an appeal.

Let me suggest how this might work. What is the first appeal that Locke makes to our moral sense? The appeal to our intuition that the Bible simply must forbid cannibalism in all cases is clearly visible in I 27. But further toward the beginning, it seems the permission to determine the extent of God's donation from the combination of Gen. 1:26 and Gen. 1:28 relies upon an intuition we have about what the relationship between God's declared intention and His actions simply must be (cf. I 26). Yet even further back toward the beginning, the fact that we can read Gen. 1:28 in light of what we know about positive grants itself relies upon a sense of what God simply must do when He communicates (cf. I 25). This expectation clearly does not follow from a logical necessity, as every poor or malicious promulgator of laws demonstrates; it trusts instead in a kind of a moral necessity.

Thus, how to interpret the Bible is not a question of whether it is permissible to bring in our own extra-scriptural moral judgments or not, but rather simply *which* moral judgments one may import. Even the *de minimis* judgment that God communicates clearly when clarity is to be expected expresses a faith that God is a good ruler. And this demonstrates that a morally informed interpretation of the Bible is not in fact foreign to the orientation that would

condemn such an interpretation: biblical literalism is simply confused about its own supposed freedom from upon moral presuppositions, about its own supposed refusal to make demands of God concerning what He may be.

Locke's trap is intended to demonstrate, in addition, that we cannot limit the moral intuitions that we use to guide our understanding of the Bible solely to what is required for a belief in clear communication and so in this way limit the damage from Locke's critique of biblical literalism. For the attempt to do so merely demonstrates that this is *not* what the Bible does, that God has *not* communicated so clearly with us that we can understand His word by reference to His word alone. At this point, then, one might question if the only way that one could understand the Bible—and therefore preserve its relevance to human life—would be to bring our moral awareness to it, to interpret it in the way that Locke does in the middle and end of chapter four.

Locke's treatment of Gen. 1:28 shows (or purports to show) that one cannot interpret the Bible without an appeal to one's moral sense. It cannot be interpreted in a manner that relies upon neither human wisdom nor natural reason regarding moral questions. Now it is possible on the basis of what Locke says in the *Second Treatise* to affirm that one must appeal to conscience or divine guidance in order to understand the Bible's words aright; Locke does not there attack the conscience or enthusiasm. And, so long as a reader accepts that one must interpret the Bible in such a light, they can adhere to Locke's political project (assuming they are not predisposed against it). There is no need to shake them from this liberal Christian embrace of his political thought. But, one who has become suspicious of the conscience or enthusiasm, either on their own or from having read the *Essay Concerning Human*

*Understanding*, would have to conclude that the Bible must be interpreted according to natural reason (if it is not to be discarded entirely). And as we know that Locke is the author of the *Essay*, we can conclude that Locke would be closer to this version of a liberal Christian conclusion.

### **Locke's controversion of liberal Christianity**

Of course, there are two main problems with saying that Locke's ultimate intention is to bring his most careful readers to an acceptance of liberal Christianity. First, nothing in the preceding section *proves* that the only way to make sense of the Bible is to read it in light of our notions concerning justice. Or rather, nothing suggests that our notions concerning justice actually *do* make sense of the passages that are problematic on the basis of a literal reading. Indeed, Locke merely demolishes the only alternative to such a reading, without any positive argument establishing that such a reading either makes sense of or is even permitted by the text. At the same time, he intimates that there are moral presuppositions involved in the demand that Scripture be our only guide to Scripture's meaning, that one never really submits without holding God to a moral standard of some kind, while giving an example of a different approach to biblical interpretation.

The second problem with the contention that Locke here advocates a *liberal* Christianity is all of the problems with the Bible that Pangle has pointed to. If one does not surrender one's moral commitments at the door, Locke would seem to go out of his way to demonstrate that the biblical God is morally grotesque. One cannot maintain a morally informed reading of the Bible in the face of this without jettisoning most of the Bible, and when one is willing to do that there is no way in which the Bible might challenge or inform one's convictions. One might

claim, contra Pangle, that Locke was too pious to apply what he says about justice to God, that he would have recoiled in horror at the implications of his arguments that Pangle discerns. I hope to have demonstrated that this submissive-literalist interpretation of Locke cannot stand.

The purpose of the passages Pangle identifies do seem to be point toward a moral critique, once one is freed from the Locke-as-mundanelly-orthodox mindset. The only way to argue that Locke does not intentionally make God look bad is to say that he was too pious to do such a thing or had no interest in refuting the Bible; neither is plausible given the presence of Locke's textual critique. For those willing to say that the Bible must be interpreted in light of our moral conceptions, Locke demonstrates the impossibility of doing so. But if this were the whole of Locke's theologico-political argument, without the textual critique I have described, it would be on shaky ground.

Locke's critique of the Bible, as Pangle presents it, does not show that complete submission to an utterly mysterious God is humanly impossible but rather exhibits only a refusal to submit. Conceiving of God as a judge and holding Him to that standard requires that one know beforehand what justice is. Yet the secular accounts of justice attributed to Locke seem to *presuppose* the success of his theological critique and so could not be deployed in the service of that critique. The accounts of Locke's law of nature that are not secular, by contrast, make might into right, right existing solely because of the fiat of Omnipotence, and so certainly cannot be turned against that Omnipotence. The fact that most people do not experience God as being beyond good and evil, the fact that most people do indeed make their God cognizable rather than radically mysterious when it comes to His wisdom and justice, does not grant sufficient leave to engage in a moral critique, for it is not clear that most people have achieved



the heights of piety demanded by the Bible. If anything, more interpreters of the Bible say the opposite.

What Locke does in the universally-neglected opening sections of chapter four is to render the Bible susceptible to the moral critique of religion, or at least that is his intention. He suggests that the sorts of considerations that go into the moral critique are not actually foreign to the Bible. One cannot resist the moral critique by retreating ever further into the sanctuary of a supra- and even ir-rational revelation, permitting even that God be beyond good and evil in order to preserve one's faith in Him and His promises. At the very least, the hypothetical scripture that would not be susceptible to the moral critique, that could demand to be interpreted by itself alone, is not what we confront in the Bible. This is to say that the Bible, in order to be the authority that it claims it should be in our life, simply cannot require any *sacrificium intellectus*. The set of revelations that cannot be dislodged by the moral critique is empty.

## ***Conclusion***

While I touched briefly upon the matter of Locke's giving a different message to different readers, I should conclude by making this explicit. Some of Locke's potential readers already interpret the Bible liberally, even if it would be unacceptable to acknowledge such a reading, even to themselves.<sup>18</sup> Some readers by contrast would be literalists. (One might say that some readers would already have been liberated from reliance upon religion, but Locke

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<sup>18</sup> Algernon Sidney is one example of such a reader, though he had of course been executed in between Locke's writing the *Two Treatises* and its publication; see Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, ed. Thomas G. West (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1996).

does not think that he will have any trouble bringing them along, his opponents resting solely upon superstitious beliefs in his eyes.) At the same time, whether one reads Scripture literally or liberally does not predetermine one's politics; thus, Locke's readers can be categorized as those who are favorable, opposed, or persuadable concerning his political project. A third axis of differentiation involves probing readers and careless ones.

We can say that those who are favorable to Locke's politics are not a problem. Some will detect scriptural irregularities, others will not; some will think themselves biblical literalists, others will hew to a more liberal reading. Still, they are unlikely to abandon the political system they favor because an anonymous author supported it badly or write a public exposé of an anonymous fellow-traveler's shocking impiety. At worst, they will just not commend the *Two Treatises* to people.

Rather, Locke's argument is directed at his persuadable readers, those who are hesitant to accept the Lockean program for scriptural reasons but are not dead set against it. Careless or liberal readers will be easily brought along, since Locke addresses their scriptural questions. But what about probing readers? A moral critique might persuade some who have already taken to reading the Bible liberally, but what of sympathetic literalists? The sections I have discussed are aimed primarily at them. His strategy seems to be to seduce or persuade them into accepting a more liberal reading, at which point the most promising among them can be swayed by the moral critique.

Doesn't Locke risk the ire of his hostile readers, however, and indeed of making more of them, in including a biblical critique in the *Two Treatises*? Isn't this reason enough, it might be

urged, to reject outright the possibility that he included such a critique? To this I have two responses.

First, I am confident that the evidence against the pious-Locke hypothesis that I have presented is solid enough that we must guide our sense of what Locke thought was in his rhetorical interest, of why he would do something, around what he did, and what he did is to reduce biblical literalism to the absurd before commencing with a liberal reading of the Bible. Theories of authorial intent or historical context might inform one's interpretation where actions are ambiguous, but they are not ambiguous in this case. In any event, intellectual rigor requires that Locke have such an argument, and probity leads men to desire that their books be as perfect as possible when it comes to argumentation.

Second, this objection overstates the risk Locke runs in critiquing the Bible. Any careful, hostile reader who decided to expose the impiety at the root of the *Two Treatises* would take their place alongside careless, hostile readers, their accurate unveilings of Locke's procedure alongside naked slanders. Because the exposure of Locke would be so involved, so arcane, it would be difficult to tell the difference between serious and frivolous accusations of atheism. It would certainly be easy for anyone sympathetic to the Lockean political project to dismiss them all as hostile slanderers, either to themselves or to others.

I close by noting that, while something like Locke's gambit would be necessary to place the moral critique of biblical religion upon solid ground, Locke himself does not succeed in this. The premise of his argument, on whatever level we take it, is that the grant of dominion in Gen. 1:28 is of enduring concern, that it *is* a command to contemporary readers of the Bible. It does not seem necessary to take it this way. Precisely if Filmer is wrong about that verse then it

does not bear on human obedience to God. Locke would not be repeating the details of Spinoza's higher criticism, but the textual critique I attribute to him would be open to the same objection: both rely on the claim that they do not understand what they think they should understand and that the text must therefore be senseless.

The success or failure of Locke's critique aside, however, its presence demonstrates that there is not a religious foundation to his political thought. He thinks it is the work of natural reason and as such of universal applicability. Locke does not think that he speaks of "Western" rights or that he defends a parochially post-Christian political settlement, but rather that the natural rights of man as such demand liberalism.