THE SECULAR BIBLE

Today's secularists too often have very little accurate knowledge about religion, and even less desire to learn. This is problematic insofar as their sense of self is constructed in opposition to religion. Above all, the secularist is *not* a Jew, *not* a Christian, *not* a Muslim, and so on. But is it intellectually responsible to define one's identity against something that one does not understand? And what happens when these secularists weigh in on contentious political issues, blind to the religious back-story or concerns that inevitably inform these debates?

In *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*, Jacques Berlinerblau suggests that atheists and agnostics must take stock of that which they so adamantly oppose. Defiantly maintaining a shallow understanding of religion, he argues, is not a politically prudent strategy in this day and age. But this book is no less critical of many believers, who – Berlinerblau contends – need to emancipate themselves from ways of thinking about their faith that are dangerously simplistic, irrational, and outdated. Exploring the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, from the perspective of a specialist, nonbeliever, and critic of the academic religious studies establishment, Berlinerblau begins by offering a provocative answer to the question of "who wrote the Bible?" The very peculiar way in which this text was composed provides a key to understanding its unique power (and vulnerability) in the modern public sphere. In separate chapters, he looks at how the sparse and contradictory words of Scripture are invoked in contemporary disputes about Jewish intermarriage and homosexuality in the Christian world. Finally, he examines ways in which the Qur'ān might be subject to the types of secular interpretation advocated throughout this book. Cumulatively, this book is a first attempt to reinvigorate an estimable secular, intellectual tradition, albeit one that is currently experiencing a moment of crisis.

Jacques Berlinerblau, who holds separate PhDs in ancient Near Eastern languages and Sociology, is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Languages at Hofstra University and Visiting Professor of Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University. He has published numerous scholarly books and articles, including *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals.*

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Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously

JACQUES BERLINERBLAU
Hofstra University

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521853149

First published 2005

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Berlinerblau, Jacques.
The secular Bible : why nonbelievers must take religion seriously / Jacques Berlinerblau.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-521-85314-9 (hardback)
ISBN-10: 0-521-85314-1 (hardback)
ISBN-13: 978-0-521-61824-3 (pbk.)
ISBN-10: 0-521-61824-X (pbk.)
1. Bible. O.T. – Introductions. 2. Secularism. I. Title.
BS1140.3.B47 2005
221.6′6 – dc22 2005012432

ISBN-13 978-0-521-85314-9 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-85314-1 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-61824-3 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-61824-X paperback

To Ippolita and Cyrus
Petite famille heureuse

The *Old* Testament – that is something else again: all honour to the Old Testament! I find in it great human beings, a heroic landscape, and something of the very rarest quality in the world, the incomparable naïveté of the *strong heart*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

Yes, our first ancestors, our Adams and our Eves, were, if not gorillas, very near relatives of gorillas, omnivorous, intelligent and ferocious beasts, endowed in a higher degree than the animals of any other species with two precious faculties – *the power to think* and *the desire to rebel*.

Michael Bakunin, *God and the State*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The reader is forewarned that I have employed the "we" form throughout the main body of this work. By doing so I do not mean to imply that the ideas expressed here represent the unified position of a group of scholars. Nor do I want to suggest that my ideas are so overpoweringly persuasive that my audience has been won over, absorbed submissively into the empire of the present author's fictitious "us." What follows are, ostensibly, my own ideas and I fully expect (and hope) that my readers will disagree with many of them. But a sense of modesty compelled even this secularist to avoid the constant insertion of "I" into sentences whose subject was God, the Holy Spirit, Moses, Origen, Ibn Ezra, and so on. Aside from the artlessness of it all, is there not something a tad narcissistic about constantly calling attention to the self when discussing such figures?

In today's academy it is everywhere assumed (but nowhere, to the best of my knowledge, persuasively argued) that the use of "I" in scholarly writing represents something of a rhetorical/ideological breakthrough. Viewed as an improvement upon the imperious, duplicitous "we" of yesteryear, the new usage has become the industry standard. Well, a few decades into the regime of the "I" perhaps it is time to take stock. Has recourse to the first-person singular significantly increased the ability of scholars to discover new ideas? Has the quality of our research improved now that the author speaks directly to the audience? Most importantly, is our readership better served or more appreciative of our work and – as a result – growing? In other words, are sales up? This is not a nostalgic call for a return to an old and troubled narrative voicing. Rather, I simply encourage a renewed attention and openness to questions of literary *style*, acknowledging the need to be less self-centered, less circumscribed, when

conveying our ideas. The arguments we proffer should entice more than those interested in our arcane fields of inquiry. Perhaps the use of "we" – with both its inclusiveness and its ironic detachment (a paradox that all secularists might value) – will appeal to those beyond our parochial academic boundaries.

The research for this book was conducted mostly in New York, but significant strides were made in France and Italy. In the summer of 2001, I finalized the blueprint for this study while sitting at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. A finer library for the study of Scripture I have never seen. A good deal of research was conducted in Paris where I was warmly received by Dr. Arnaud Serandour and Ms. Catherine Fauveaud of the Bibliothèque d'Études Sémitiques of the College de France. On Broadway, I am grateful to Dr. Philip E. Miller, Mr. James Cohn, Mr. Lou Massone, and Ms. Tina Weiss of the Klau Library of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

The students of my home institution, Hofstra University, are good natured to a fault. They actually seem to like hearing ideas that – to paraphrase Wellhausen – render them unfit for office. One of my undergraduate majors, Ms. Shira Blank, was especially helpful in resolving assorted bibliographical dilemmas. I also benefited immeasurably from graduate teaching stints at Drew Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College. Indeed, it was by working at these institutions that I became intrigued, if not obsessed, with self-critical religious intellectuals.

This is a far better book than what I originally had in mind and this is due to the work of two young and highly gifted editors. Ms. Erin Carter, now of Oxford University Press, made immense contributions to the look, style, and feel of the text. I cannot exaggerate how central a role she has played in this project. Mr. Andrew Beck of Cambridge University Press has excelled in every aspect of the modern academic editor's job description – from identifying weak arguments, to suggesting new lines of inquiry, to talking the author down from the ledge.

I wish to thank my colleagues Drs. Daniel Boyarin, Jorunn Buckley, Philip Davies, Sondra Farganis, Herb Huffmon, Barbara Lekatsas, Sabine Loucif, Ilaria Marchesi, Richard Martin, Sara Reguer, David Sperling, Dan Varisco, Ziony Zevit, and Dr. Massoud Fazeli and his merry band of

Iranian expatriate economists. To members of my inner circle who were more or less ignored during the three years that this text was written I can only invoke the words of Virgil: "Friends and companions, have we not known hard hours before this?" I mention here with great fondness James Eisenberg, Ruby Namdar, and Camala Projansky. I did manage, however, to spend a little time in the excellent company of my parents Rubin and Laurette Berlinerblau, my in-laws Patsy and Pasquale Spadavecchia, the Goodmans, the Italian branch and the French branch. This work is dedicated to my wife Ippolita Spadavecchia and my son Cyrus Olivier Berlinerblau. Avoiding the obligatory suffering-but-loyal-partner motif, let me praise her for embodying everything that I associate with the term "grace." As for Cyrus: I hope that, twenty years on, he reads this book – if only so he will know what a spectacular little boy he was.

October 25th 2004
Battery Park City, New York