

On Jesus, Derrida, and Dawkins

Rejoinder to Joshua Harris

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We are grateful to Joshua Harris for his thoughtful response to our article in which we express certain misgivings about the conjunction of Pentecostalism with James K. A. Smith's postmodern, story-based epistemology.¹ According to Smith, everything (including the gospel) is a story or interpretation: "we never get past texts and interpretations to things 'simply as they are' in any unmediated fashion . . . rather, we move from interpretation to interpretation."² What stories do (to varying degrees) organize our "affective registers"—the bubbling cauldron of our emotions, which are themselves "hermeneutic filters" that do the "work of interpreting our world."³ When the story is right, there is a kind of "fit" or proportionality between narrative and

ABSTRACT: In this paper we respond to three objections raised by Joshua Harris to our article, "Against a Postmodern Pentecostal Epistemology," in which we express misgivings about the conjunction of Pentecostalism with James K. A. Smith's postmodern, story-based epistemology. According to Harris, our critique (1) problematically assumes a correspondence theory of truth, (2) invalidly concludes that "Derrida's Axiom" conflicts with "Peter's Axiom," and (3) fails to consider an alternative account of the universality of Christian truth claims. We argue that Harris's objections either demonstrate a deficient interpretation of the relevant biblical passages or are not directed at us at all.

1. See, in particular, Smith's *Thinking in Tongues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). Joshua Lee Harris, "Who's Truth? A Response to Davis and Franks's 'Against a Postmodern Pentecostal Epistemology,'" *Philosophia Christi* 16 (2014): 175–184.

2. James K. A. Smith, "A Response to the 'Biola School,'" in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 225.

3. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 66.

affective register. Truth doesn't consist in a story's corresponding with reality; rather, "The truth *is* the story; the narrative *is* the knowledge."⁴

Now at the outset, it is important to note (*contra* Harris) that we are not arguing "for the [logical] *incompatibility* of James K. A. Smith's 'post-modern epistemology' with the gospel."⁵ That is no part of our project. Our critique is more *epistemic* than anything. If story-fit is the (affective) goal—and there's little else it could be, if *everything* is an interpretation—then the unbeliever is perfectly within his rights in rejecting the gospel on the grounds that it doesn't "fit" with his affective register. Thus equating truth with stories (more exactly, story-fit) provides an excuse to those scripture tells us are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). Further, it lands us in an objectionable story-relativism, since a story that "fits" with Richard Dawkins's affective register (say, the Grand Evolutionary Story) might not "fit" with yours. Even so, it will be Dawkins's story and hence *his truth*. Still further, since the criteria for evaluating stories are themselves story-relative, and we have no access to the objective facts, anyone who presents his story as *the* truth, that is, presents it from a God's-eye vantage point (say, in the fashion of Jesus or Paul, or even Smith in *Thinking in Tongues*) is guilty of story-ism: "favoring one's own story over others without legitimate reason."⁶

All of this being said by way of clarification, we now turn to Harris's three objections.

The Identity Objection

According to Harris, our differences with Smith lie mainly in our differing accounts of truth. We employ a kind of correspondence theory—one that "posits a realm of non-linguistic reality to which linguistic propositions correspond, while [Smith's hermeneutic] posits an interrelated whole of reality that is linguistic 'all the way down.'"⁷ Now this claim that reality is linguistic "all the way down" is initially puzzling. What could it possibly mean? Is the idea that reality is a complex whole consisting solely of linguistic parts? That doesn't seem right. For surely God is a part of reality (of all there is), but nothing like a *linguistic* part—say, some phrase or sentence. After all, no linguistic item can bring the universe into existence, create an original human pair, or part the Red Sea. Bits of language are just the wrong sorts of things for that.

4. *Ibid.*, 64.

5. Harris, "Who's Truth?," 175 (emphasis in original).

6. Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, "Against a Postmodern Pentecostal Epistemology," *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 384.

7. Harris, "Who's Truth?," 176. Strictly speaking, our critique doesn't presuppose that truth bearers are "linguistic propositions" as Harris seems to suggest. Indeed, one of us has argued explicitly against this understanding of propositions. See Richard Davis, "God and the Platonic Horde: A Defense of Limited Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 295–6.

What Harris really means to say, we suspect, is that while there may be some ill-defined reality on the other side of language, all we have access to is the language: our stories or narratives, but not the things they are about. Here there is perhaps some very small consolation in the fact that (on this view) stories needn't correspond with this elusive noumenal reality; we can have truth just by having the stories even if they fail to correspond in the most spectacular ways. For, of course, the truth *is* the story. Contrary to what one would initially expect, Harris's claim is that this is a far better way for a Christian to think about truth than as any correspondence between a proposition (however conceived) and what it represents.

But *why* is it better? Harris directs us to Jesus's statement in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This verse favors Smith's view of truth, we are told, since it rules out truth as correspondence "from the outset." For "Christ is not identical to the correspondence of linguistic propositions and nonlinguistic reality; rather, he is the condition of possibility for reality."⁸ In the interests of clarity, Harris sets out his argument as follows:⁹

- (1) If the correspondence theory of truth holds, then truth itself is identical to the correspondence of linguistic propositions and nonlinguistic reality.
- (2) Truth itself is identical to Christ.
- (3) The correspondence of linguistic propositions and nonlinguistic reality is not identical to Christ.
- (4) *Ergo*, truth itself is not the correspondence of linguistic propositions and nonlinguistic reality.

What are we to make of this objection? It is beset by a number of problems. First, it is unnecessary and almost certainly irrelevant. In our paper we never advance or defend a particular account of truth. Our dialectical aim is simply to demonstrate the various untoward consequences of embracing Smith's epistemology. And here it is important to see that we can do that without having to provide anything like an alternative account. As Alvin Plantinga observes in another connection:

If you think a given explanation or theory T is less likely than its denial, or even if you think it is only somewhat more likely than its denial, you quite properly won't believe it. This is so even if you can't think of another theory or explanation of the phenomena that you believe more probable than not, or even more probable than T.¹⁰

8. Harris, "Who's Truth?," 177.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Alvin Plantinga, "On Rejecting the Theory of Common Ancestry: A Reply to Hasker," *Perspectives on Science and Faith* 44 (1992): 259.

Harris has simply assumed that our critique *depends upon* the idea that truth is correspondence. Accordingly, even if everything he says about correspondence is true, it is by no means clear (because he hasn't shown) that it is an indispensable assumption on our part.

Secondly, even if we are committed to correspondence and Harris's argument is sound, that won't show that Smith's story account of truth is the superior of the two. For we can easily construct an argument of the same structure but against the "truth is the story" view. It goes like this:

- (5) If the story account of truth holds, then truth itself is identical to a story, or a "fit" between a story and an affective register.
- (6) Truth itself is identical to Christ.
- (7) Christ is not identical with a story, or a "fit" between a story and an affective register.

Hence

- (8) Truth itself is neither identical to a story, nor a "fit" between a story and an affective register.

This argument is relevantly similar to Harris's (1)–(4) and of equal strength. If so, however, then the story account is really no better off than the much maligned correspondence theory, in which case it can hardly be deemed *superior*.

Third, Harris's argument is actually unsound, since its second premise is clearly false. Harris has misread Jesus's statement in John 14:6. Jesus claims that he is the truth, that is,

(JC) Jesus is the truth.

However, what (JC) means, says Harris, is "that Christ is not merely the 'true' God but also *truth itself*."¹¹ In other words, Harris takes the "is" in (JC) as the "is" of numerical identity. Thus, on his view, what (JC) is really saying is

(JC*) Jesus is identical with the truth,

which explains why (2) appears the way it does in his argument. But (JC*) is surely mistaken. For one thing, it doesn't square with the context of John 14, which should be what informs our reading of (JC). By itself, the statement "Jesus is the truth" is incomplete. It immediately raises the question, "The truth about *what*?" And the context of John 14 provides the clue.

Having just told his disciples that he will be going to his Father's house, and that in fact they know the way to where he is going, Thomas asks, "How can we know the way?" (14:5). It is at that point that Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). The way *where*? Obviously, to the Father. The truth *about what*? Well, in the context of that passage it's very

11. Harris, "Who's Truth?," 177.

clear that Jesus means to say that he is the truth about the Father. His words correspond to the Father's (v.10); his being corresponds with that of the Father (v.11); and his actions correspond with the Father's will (v.31). Thus, when Jesus says he is the truth, he's not using the "is" of identity (as Harris thinks) but that of predication.

At any rate, if we do attribute (JC*) to Jesus, and treat him as making a numerical identity claim, then in effect we reduce his claim about himself to sheer incoherence. For if Jesus *is identical with* truth, then to say that "2 + 2 = 4" is true is to say that "2 + 2 = 4" *is* Jesus. In other words, Jesus is claiming to be a mathematical statement! Obviously, this can't be what John 14:6 means.

The Interpretation Objection

In our original paper, we note that Smith cleaves to Derrida's Axiom (DA)—the thesis that everything whatsoever is an interpretation. In passing, we make the observation that DA actually contradicts Peter's Axiom (PA): "No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20). So we are at an impasse. DA states that *everything* is an interpretation; PA states that some things, namely, prophecies of scripture, are not. Therefore, even if there were no other reasons to reject DA (there are and we carefully spell them out), Pentecostal Christians—indeed Christians in general—are certainly justified in siding with the Apostle Peter here, who under the Spirit's inspiration penned 2 Peter 1:20. Jacques Derrida, it is safe to say, wasn't similarly inspired.

Now according to Harris, this observation on our part is a nonstarter. DA and PA are perfectly compatible, he says, once we understand that DA actually incorporates PA properly understood. PA only says the prophecies aren't the result of the prophet's *own* interpretation; it doesn't follow they aren't the result of *any* interpretation. Unfortunately, Harris drops the matter altogether at that point; he never does tell us whose interpretation does (or even might) give rise to these prophecies.

One possibility here might be to appeal, not to the prophet alone, but to the wider interpretive community of which he is a part. This dovetails nicely with Smith's contention that interpretation is a communal activity. And then to secure the universal scope of DA—to ensure that everything remains an interpretation—Harris could advance an axiom of his own—call it "Harris's Axiom":

(HA) All prophecies of scripture are a matter of communal interpretation.

In this way, he can position himself to affirm Peter's Axiom (a plus), while pointing out that in no way does this threaten Derrida's Axiom—at least if HA is also true.

But *is* HA true? Surely not. Here again, Harris is overlooking the context. The reason Peter gives for thinking that prophecies of scripture don't emerge from a prophet's interpretation of things is perfectly general. It applies to *all* human interpretation, including human *communal* interpretation. The reason is just this: "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man" (2 Pet. 1:21a). Notice he doesn't say "by the will of the prophet." It's much more general than that; no prophecy has arisen by way of "the will of man"—any man. By implication, then, prophecy results from God's willing it. As Peter says, "men spoke *from God* as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21b). God originates the content and then preserves it from human gloss and distortion.

It will do no good here to attempt to save Derrida's Axiom by claiming that prophecies do in fact come from God; they come from *his* interpretation of things. The problem with this move is that it's evident that when God breathes out scripture, he's not interpreting anything. He's simply revealing how things are, were, or will be. He breathes out scripture; *we* interpret it. In the end, therefore, even if we didn't have all the other reasons we offered against Derrida's Axiom, Peter's Axiom would alone be enough for rejecting what Derrida and Smith say—at least for those who accept and carefully attend to Peter's words.

The Incommensurability Objection

Harris's final objection isn't really directed at us at all. He rightly notes that an obvious criticism of Smith's project would be that "it implies the unseemly position of incommensurability between separate narrative traditions."¹² Thus, we invited readers to consider Richard Dawkins's "narrative tradition":

For Dawkins, the story of descent with modification produces the greatest "fit"; it "makes sense" of his affective register, so he says, and everything else besides. And since, for Smith, "The truth *is* the story," Darwinism is "true"—not absolutely and objectively of course; for that would deny Derrida's Axiom—but rather *true for Dawkins*. That's his truth.¹³

Now consider Smith's claim that the criteria for evaluating a story like Dawkins's (which we presume Smith takes to be false) "function as rules only for those who share the same paradigm or participate in the same lan-

12. *Ibid.*

13. Davis and Franks, "Against a Postmodern Pentecostal Epistemology," 397.

guage game.”¹⁴ That’s certainly a problem. Since the Christian operates out of a different paradigm, he finds himself in the curious and frustrating position of not being able to say that Dawkins’s story, which includes the claim that there is no God, is false. Since there is no neutral vantage point, all he can say is that it is false *within the Christian story*. Any attempt to share the gospel with Dawkins amounts to asking him to replace his story with the Christian story. But why should he do so, if his story already enjoys the greatest “fit” with his affective register?

Here Harris is inclined to agree. He writes:

to give credit where credit is due: I think that [the Davis and Franks] critique of Smith’s “metanarrative about stories” . . . does indeed incriminate the latter’s project at a fundamental level . . . a metanarrative that denies the reality of metanarratives is self-referentially incoherent.¹⁵

He goes on to offer Smith some advice about his project. Christian claims aren’t universal in the sense that they are uttered from a “neutrally accessible realm of reality”¹⁶ Rather, they are universal in that “Christ himself is the ‘*Logos*-principle’ of all things.” He then speaks about believing things “from this *Logos* perspective.”¹⁷ Richard Dawkins’s real problem, says Harris, is that he is ignorant of Christ as *Logos*. If he were to see things from the Christian perspective, he would know the truth about the universe, himself, and most importantly the God who made it. That’s right. But as we point out in our paper, it’s also a wholly question-begging assertion if made against the backdrop of Smith’s story epistemology. The problem isn’t that Smith fails to recognize that Christ is the *Logos*. It’s the fact that inside his system it is actually Derrida who reigns supreme, blocking us in principle from ever accessing the objective facts that might justify our privileging the gospel over all the other stories on offer. What we have instead is only story “fit.” Sadly, however, for story relativists like Smith, one size doesn’t fit all.

14. Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives,” 132.

15. Harris, “Who’s Truth?,” 181.

16. *Ibid.*, 182.

17. *Ibid.*