

Interview with Steve Wells from the Skeptic's Annotated Bible

Contributed by Steve Wells
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This month Nexus is pleased to interview Steve Wells, the bloke behind the Skeptic's Annotated Bible, where a lot of us first got our start in critically reading the big book. Thanks, Steve! If you haven't checked out the ASB before, take the opportunity to give it a read: you won't be disappointed. And if you're looking to get a reference copy for yourself, check out the CD-Rom version, which can be sent right to your door!

How did you come to be non-religious? Were you raised that way, or did you have a deconversion experience?

I was raised in a non-religious environment, with an agnostic father and a vaguely Protestant mother. By the time I was twelve, I considered myself an atheist and I argued with anyone with any form of religious belief. It always seemed obvious to me that God was imaginary and religion was only superstition.

But then, after graduating from high school, I read the New Testament. I didn't immediately believe it, of course, but I was taken by the personality and sayings of Jesus. I was primed and ready to believe, and when it comes to religion, that's all it takes.

While I was in college, my older sister became a Catholic, and she and I had many long conversations about religion. I began to attend mass occasionally with her, and while I didn't actually believe any of it, I started to admire the teaching and tradition of the Catholic Church. Before I knew it, I had convinced myself that I actually believed it, and decided that I wanted to become a Catholic priest.

This was in the seventies, and the Church was still trying to figure itself out after the Second Vatican Council. I wasn't interested in being a new Catholic; I wanted the old Church, with the old mass in Latin and the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. So I entered a traditionalist seminary, which is where I started to lose my faith.

I began to argue with the seminary professors about the doctrines of the Church. How could there be no salvation outside the Church? Does that mean my family is going to hell, along with all other non-traditionalist Catholics (which is pretty much everyone)? I had problems with nearly every teaching, but it was the idea of hell that did me in.

So I left the seminary, but I remained in the Church. A few years later I was married with four kids, all of which were baptized Catholics. But by the time our last child was born, my faith was pretty much gone. One day while returning from a camping trip (I still remember the exact moment), I told my wife, Carole, that I no longer believed any of it and I wasn't going to pretend any longer.

Poor Carole (who was raised a traditionalist Catholic) was pretty upset over that. She got out all our catechisms and theology books, saying she was going to convince me that I was wrong. That lasted about a week or so, and then she decided she didn't believe any of it either. We've both lived a lot happier ever after.

What made you start up the SAB? Why do you think it's a necessary resource?

I started the SAB while trying to talk my sister (the one who had previously converted to Catholicism) out of becoming a Jehovah's Witness.

You see, I'd never actually read the Bible before, not all the way through, anyway. Oh, I tried back when I supposedly believed in the darned thing, but I just couldn't make it through Leviticus. But I decided it had to be done to keep my sister from becoming a JW.

It didn't work, of course. She became a JW anyway, and she still is to this day. But I managed to finish reading the Bible, and I was shocked with what I read.

I started to highlight the interesting stuff: yellow for absurdity, red for cruelty, green for contradictions, blue for sex, etc. And then it occurred to me. Why hasn't anyone done this before? Why hasn't a skeptic created an annotated version of the Bible with all the interesting stuff highlighted? And with that idea, the SAB was born.

I originally hoped (and still do) to create a print version, but then the internet came along and I knew it would work there. So I created the SAB website in November of 1999 and have been working on it ever since.

What do you tell religious people – Christians, for instance – when they ask you why they should read your version of their texts?

Well, it's not really my version. It's just the Bible, with my unimportant remarks attached. The important thing is for people, believers and skeptics, to read the Bible and to think about what they've read.

I try to highlight the things that would be of most interest to someone who is trying to decide what to make of the Bible. Is it a good book? Could it have been inspired by a kind and loving God? Does it contain any contradictions? Does it conflict with science and history? What does it say about women, homosexuality, and family values?

If after reading the Bible a person decides to believe it is the Word of God, well and good. But a sane, kind, intelligent person is unlikely to do so.

How long did it take you to do? Did it surprise you that you were able to pick out so many errors and questionable statements? Which of your "categories" [e.g. Absurdity, Injustice…] gets the most use?

I started 18 years ago highlighting verses in the Bible with boxes of index cards for the annotations. It began with my own color-coded highlights; then I consulted other books and eventually the internet for additional material.

I'm not sure which of the categories get the most use, although believers like to focus on the contradictions. That's because they are so easy to explain away. ("That's what it says, but that's not what it means", etc.) Explaining how a kind and loving God would send two bears to rip up 42 little boys for making fun of a prophet's bald head (2 Kings 2:23-24) is tougher.

What's been your favourite chapter to do, and why?

The book of Judges is probably my favorite. It's just a series of bizarrely cruel stories thrown together for no apparent reason. I cannot imagine a book less likely to have been inspired by anyone or anything remotely resembling a kind and loving God.

People can buy copies of the SAB on CD. How's it looking on getting a print version out soon?

Not so good, I'm afraid. I contacted publishers before the SAB site was created, but they were reluctant because the book would be expensive to produce and its author was completely unknown. After the site became fairly successful, I expected to get a few offers from publishers, but so far that hasn't happened. But maybe it will someday.

I see you've got a pretty good association going with the Brick Testament – we interviewed Brendan Powell-Smith recently as well. How did that get started?

Yeah, I love the Brick Testament. The BT stories capture the essence of the Bible in a way that simple words cannot. They are also very funny, of course. The Bible stories are silly to start with, but with legos, they are hilarious.

You've also done the Koran and the Book of Mormon. Do you see any commonalities in argument across the texts?

Yes, there are many similarities. Joseph Smith tried hard to make the Book of Mormon sound like the Bible – way too hard, in fact. Mark Twain said that if you took the and-it-came-to-passes out of the Book of Mormon, it would be nothing more than a pamphlet.

The Quran is the only book I know of that might even be crueler than the Bible. It is a short, very repetitive book that can be summed up with these words: "And for the disbelievers, Allah has prepared a painful doom." Of course that is the same message as the Bible and the Book of Mormon (Believe or be damned), but the Quran is much more explicit about it.

Do the three religious communities whose books you've done react the same to your versions? Is there anything you focus on that they find particularly annoying?

I have been surprised with the reaction to the Quran (SAQ) and Book of Mormon (SABoM) from Muslims and Mormons

– or from the lack of reaction, that is. There are many Christian responses to the SAB, but none to the SAQ or SABoM. And I'm not sure why that is. Maybe they figure it's better just to ignore them.

Christians try to ignore everything but the contradictions. When God behaves badly in the Bible or commands people to commit atrocities, the believers pretend not to notice. I think that's because most believers don't know what's in the Bible and those who do don't talk about it. What happens in the Bible stays in the Bible.

Do you have any plans to do any more religious texts?

No, I won't live long enough to do a decent job with what I've already started. The Bible, Book of Mormon, and the Quran are way more than one person can adequately handle. (Which is why I'm glad Sam Harris' Scripture Project <http://samharris.org/> is going to take over for me!)

What has been the most rewarding part of the whole experience for you?

Helping others to honestly think about the Bible, Book of Mormon, and the Quran. I believe people will make the right decision about these books if they take the time to find out what is in them. If the SAB helps them to do that, then my work has been worthwhile.