
Study Sheets on Scientific Atheism

*A Systematic Critique
of Religious Frameworks*

*From epistemological foundations
to the doctrines of Grace and Predestination*

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In the tradition of Russell, Hume, Feuerbach, Nietzsche

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Abstract

These study sheets organize a scientific-atheist critique of religious frameworks, moving from epistemological foundations to selected theological claims in Judaism, Christianity, and the Reformation. The purpose is to make the logical, historical, and moral pressure points explicit in a compact study format.

“The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.”

— Bertrand Russell

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

— Epicurus (attr.)

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1 Introduction

The sheets below treat disbelief as an epistemic position rather than a mere reaction against inherited religion. They therefore begin with standards of evidence and explanation, then apply those standards to monotheism, revelation, and selected historical doctrines.

2 General Theses: The Epistemology of Disbelief

Sheet 1 — The Burden of Proof

The foundational principle of scientific atheism is not that “God does not exist” as a dogmatic assertion, but that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

1. Russell’s Teapot. If someone claims that a china teapot orbits the Sun between Earth and Mars, the burden of proof rests on the claimant, not on the sceptic. Religious claims about a transcendent being are no different epistemologically.
2. The null hypothesis. The rational default is non-belief in entities for which no falsifiable evidence is presented.
3. Unfalsifiability as a defect. Theological propositions are typically constructed so that ***no conceivable observation*** could refute them. This makes them epistemically vacuous, not unassailable.

Sheet 2 — Contradictions in the Concept of God

Classical theism attributes three properties to God simultaneously: omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Each pair generates well-known paradoxes:

- The Omnipotence Paradox. Can God create a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it? Either answer limits omnipotence.

- The Problem of Evil (Theodicy). If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, the existence of gratuitous suffering is logically inexplicable. Classical “free will” defences fail to account for natural evil (earthquakes, childhood leukaemia, pandemics).
- Divine foreknowledge vs. free will. If God knows all future events with certainty, then the future is fixed, and human freedom is illusory. This undermines the entire apparatus of sin, merit, and punishment.

Sheet 3 — Psychological & Sociological Origins of Religion

- Feuerbach’s projection thesis. God is an externalisation of idealised human qualities. Theology is anthropology in disguise.
- Marx’s social function. Religion is the “opium of the people”—it anaesthetises the exploited against the perception of their own condition, serving the interests of ruling classes.
- Durkheim’s social cohesion. The “sacred” is a symbolic representation of society itself. Ritual reinforces group solidarity, not metaphysical truth.
- Cognitive science. Humans exhibit an evolved **hyperactive agency detection device** (HADD): we over-attribute intentionality to natural phenomena—a survival trait that predisposes us to theism.

Core Methodological Principle

Scientific atheism does not assert certainty about metaphysical negatives. It insists that belief should be proportioned to evidence, and that where evidence is absent, suspension of judgement—not faith—is the rational stance.

3 Monotheism: Critique of the One-God Concept

Sheet 4 — Historical Contingency of Monotheism

Monotheism is not a “natural” or inevitable theological development. It emerged from specific historical pressures:

1. From polytheism to monolatry. Early Israelite religion was not monotheistic but **monolatrous**: Yahweh was worshipped as the **national** god among many existing gods (cf. Psalm 82, Deuteronomy 32:8–9 in the Dead Sea Scrolls reading).
2. Political consolidation. The Josiah reforms (c. 621 BCE) centralised cult worship in Jerusalem, suppressing rival sanctuaries and local deities. Monotheism was, in part, a political technology for national unification.
3. Persian influence. Zoroastrian dualism profoundly shaped post-exilic Jewish theology: eschatology, angelology, the figure of Satan, and bodily resurrection.

Sheet 5 — Logical Problems Specific to Monotheism

- The problem of divine attributes. A “simple” God (Aquinas) who is identical with His attributes cannot be a person in any meaningful sense—persons have contingent properties. If God is love itself, He cannot **choose** to love; love becomes a tautology.
- Creation **ex nihilo**. If God is “outside” time and space, He lacks the temporal framework necessary for the act of “deciding” or “causing,” since causation presupposes temporal succession.
- The problem of divine hiddenness. If an omnibenevolent God exists, He would ensure that every sincere seeker could find adequate evidence for His existence. The existence of reasonable non-belief is itself evidence against such a God (J. L. Schellenberg).
- Monotheism’s exclusive truth-claim. Each monotheism de-

clares all others false while offering the same *type* of evidence (scripture, testimony, inner experience). The symmetry of competing revelations refutes all equally.

4 Revealed Religions: The Claim of Divine Revelation

Sheet 6 — Epistemology of Revelation

The concept of “divine revelation” faces several structural difficulties:

1. The authentication problem. How does one distinguish a genuine divine revelation from a hallucination, a delusion, an epileptic seizure, or a political fabrication? No non-circular criterion exists within the revelatory framework.
2. The transmission problem. Even if an original revelation occurred, centuries of oral transmission, copying, editing, and translation introduce noise that make the current text an unreliable witness to the original event.
3. The interpretation problem. Sacred texts are radically polysemic. The same verses have been used to justify slavery and abolition, war and pacifism, monarchy and democracy. If God intended a clear message, He failed.
4. The exclusivity problem. Multiple religions claim mutually exclusive revelations. Since each relies on the same *kind* of evidence (a text said to be inspired), internal consistency alone cannot adjudicate between them.

Sheet 7 — Miracles and Natural Law

“No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.”

— David Hume, *Of Miracles* (1748)

- Hume’s maxim. The probability of human error, exaggeration, or fraud *always* exceeds the probability that a law of nature has been violated.

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- Survivor bias. Miracle accounts survive because they are extraordinary. The vast majority of prayers unanswered, of relics that healed nobody, vanish from the record.
 - Cultural dependence. Miracle reports cluster in pre-scientific, low-literacy societies. They decline precisely where education, record-keeping, and medical knowledge advance.

5 Judaism: Historical and Theological Critique

Sheet 8 — The Old Testament as History

Modern biblical archaeology has undermined the historicity of the foundational narratives:

- **The Exodus.** No Egyptian record mentions a mass departure of slaves. Archaeological surveys of the Sinai find no trace of forty years of wandering by 600,000 men (plus families). The story is best understood as a national origin myth crystallised during the Babylonian exile.
- **The Conquest of Canaan.** Jericho was unfortified and largely uninhabited at the supposed date of conquest. The archaeological evidence suggests a gradual internal emergence of Israelite identity from Canaanite society, not a military invasion.
- **The United Monarchy.** The grandeur of Solomon's kingdom described in Kings is not supported by the modest material record of 10th-century BCE Jerusalem.

Sheet 9 — Ethical Critique of the Hebrew Bible

The moral content of the Torah presents acute difficulties for any attempt to derive universal ethics from it:

- **Commanded genocide (*herem*).** Deuteronomy 20:16–17 and 1 Samuel 15:3 command the total extermination of conquered peoples, including women and children, explicitly attributed to God's will.
- **Slavery legislation.** Exodus 21 regulates slavery as a lawful institution. Non-Israelite slaves may be owned permanently and bequeathed as property (Leviticus 25:44–46).
- **Collective punishment.** God punishes children for the sins of their parents (Exodus 20:5, Numbers 16:27–33).
- **Gender subordination.** Women are treated as property in marriage law (Deuteronomy 22:28–29), inheritance law, and purity regulations.

Hermeneutical Escape?

The standard defence—“these laws must be read in historical context”—concedes the central atheist point: the text is a human product reflecting the moral limitations of its authors, not the utterance of a timeless, perfect being.

Sheet 10 — The Chosen People Concept

- **Moral arbitrariness.** The election of one ethnic group as God’s favoured people implies that the Creator of the universe has ethnic preferences—a claim that sits uneasily with any concept of universal justice.
- **From theology to politics.** The “chosen people” concept has been instrumentalised throughout history to justify territorial claims, cultural supremacism, and the exclusion of outsiders from moral concern.
- **Internal contradiction.** Later prophetic universalism (Isaiah 2:2–4, Micah 4:1–3) contradicts the particularism of Deuteronomic theology, exposing the composite, multi-authored nature of the tradition.

6 Christianity: Dogmas and Contradictions

Sheet 11 — The Historical Jesus Problem

- Sources. The four canonical Gospels are not eyewitness accounts. They were composed 40–70 years after the events they describe, in Greek, by authors drawing on earlier oral traditions and written sources (Q, Mark).
- Contradictions. The Gospels disagree on: the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew vs. Luke), the date of the crucifixion (synoptics vs. John), the events at the tomb, and the post-resurrection appearances.
- Mythologisation. Many elements of the Jesus narrative—virgin birth, star of Bethlehem, walking on water, resurrection—have parallels in pre-Christian Mediterranean religions (Dionysus, Osiris, Mithras), suggesting a pattern of mythological accretion rather than historical reporting.
- Paul vs. Jesus. Paul, the earliest Christian author, shows almost no interest in the teachings or biography of the earthly Jesus. His “Christ” is a cosmic figure encountered in visions, not a remembered teacher.

Sheet 12 — The Trinity

- Logical incoherence. The doctrine asserts that God is three “persons” but one “substance.” No definition of “person” and “substance” has ever been offered that makes this claim non-contradictory without evacuating both terms of meaning.
- Historical contingency. The Trinitarian formula was settled at Nicaea (325 CE) by majority vote under imperial pressure from Constantine. Alternative Christologies (Arianism, Adoptionism, Modalism) were not refuted but *suppressed*.
- Biblical absence. The word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible. The Johannine Comma (1 John 5:7–8), long cited as

scriptural support, is a later interpolation absent from all early manuscripts.

Sheet 13 — Original Sin and Atonement

- Inherited guilt. The doctrine of Original Sin asserts that all humans are guilty because of Adam’s transgression. This violates the most elementary principle of justice: that guilt is personal and non-transferable.
- The logic of atonement. God requires a blood sacrifice—of Himself, to Himself—to forgive a transgression He could simply have pardoned. The mechanism is incoherent: how does the suffering of an innocent party erase the guilt of the guilty?
- The “sacrifice” that costs nothing. If Jesus is God and therefore cannot truly die, the “supreme sacrifice” amounts to a weekend of discomfort followed by eternal glory—not a genuine sacrifice by any meaningful standard.
- Moral hazard. The doctrine of vicarious atonement teaches that personal responsibility can be transferred. The deathbed conversion of a lifelong criminal is valued above the virtuous life of an unbeliever—a morally monstrous conclusion.

Sheet 14 — Eschatology: Hell and Eternal Punishment

- Infinite punishment for finite sins. No finite transgression can merit *infinite* punishment. Eternal hell is not justice; it is sadism elevated to a cosmic principle.
- The geography of injustice. Billions of humans have lived and died without hearing the Christian message. Condemning them for failing to believe what they never encountered is incompatible with any coherent concept of justice or mercy.
- Fear as a tool of control. The doctrine of hell functions not as a metaphysical truth but as a mechanism of psychological

coercion, keeping believers obedient and sceptics silent.

7 The Reformation: Grace, Faith, and Predestination

7.1 Luther and *Sola Fide*

Sheet 15 — Luther's Soteriological Revolution

Martin Luther's break with Rome rested on a radical reinterpretation of salvation:

1. ***Sola fide*** (faith alone). Humans are justified (declared righteous) not by works—moral effort, sacraments, pilgrimages—but solely by faith in Christ.
2. ***Sola gratia*** (grace alone). Even faith itself is not a human achievement but a gift of divine grace. The human will is, in Luther's phrase, a "***servum arbitrium***"—a bound will, incapable of turning toward God without prior divine intervention.
3. ***Sola scriptura***. The Bible alone is the supreme authority in matters of doctrine, against the Catholic triad of scripture, tradition, and papal magisterium.

The Ethical Problem

If salvation depends entirely on grace and not on moral conduct, then ethics become instrumentally irrelevant to the ultimate human concern. Luther struggled with this implication and never resolved it satisfactorily. His notorious advice to "sin boldly" (***pecca fortiter, sed fortius fide***) captures the paradox.

7.2 Calvin and Double Predestination

Sheet 16 — The Doctrine of Predestination

John Calvin radicalised Luther’s soteriology into the doctrine of double predestination:

1. Unconditional election. Before the creation of the world, God chose (***elect***) some individuals for salvation and others for damnation. This choice is entirely sovereign: it is not based on foreseen faith, merit, or any human quality.
2. Limited atonement. Christ did not die for all humanity, but only for the elect. The “universalist” passages of the New Testament (John 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:4) must be reinterpreted to mean “all kinds of people,” not “every individual.”
3. Irresistible grace. Those whom God has chosen cannot refuse His grace. Conversely, the reprobate cannot attain grace no matter how earnestly they seek it.
4. Perseverance of the saints. The elect cannot fall from grace. Apparent apostasy in a believer proves only that they were never truly elect.

These five points are sometimes summarised by the acrostic TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.

Sheet 17 — Critique of Predestination

- Moral monstrosity. A God who creates beings ***for the express purpose*** of damning them eternally is not merely unjust but indistinguishable from a cosmic torturer. The traditional language of “divine justice” becomes an Orwellian inversion.
- Destruction of moral agency. If every human action is determined by prior divine decree, then praise and blame, reward and punishment, are meaningless. The entire moral universe collapses into a puppet theatre.

- Epistemic paralysis. The doctrine generates intolerable anxiety: ***am I among the elect?*** Since no human action can confirm or deny election, the believer is trapped in permanent uncertainty about the only question that (supposedly) matters. Weber famously argued that this anxiety drove Calvinists toward compulsive worldly activity and capital accumulation as ***indirect*** signs of election—the “Protestant ethic” as psychological compensation.
- The problem of prayer. If God’s decrees are fixed from eternity, prayer is futile: it cannot change outcomes. Yet Calvin insisted on its necessity—an incoherence masked by appeals to mystery.
- Internal biblical contradiction. Predestination sits in tension with numerous biblical passages that presuppose genuine human choice: “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15); “Whoever will, let him come” (Revelation 22:17). Calvin’s exegesis requires reading these as divine rhetoric addressed to beings who cannot, in fact, choose—a reading bordering on divine deception.

Sheet 18 — Grace: A Genealogy of the Concept

- Pauline origins. Paul’s letters introduce ***charis*** (grace) as God’s unmerited favour, set against the “works of the law”. However, Paul’s own usage is inconsistent: Romans 9 suggests absolute divine sovereignty, while Romans 2:6–7 implies judgement according to works.
- Augustine’s systematisation. Augustine, shaped by his personal struggle with desire and his anti-Pelagian polemic, hardened grace into irresistible divine causality. His doctrine of ***massa damnata***—the entire human race as a “lump of damnation” from which God rescues a few—laid the foundation for Calvin.
- The Pelagian alternative. Pelagius argued that humans have genuine free will and the natural capacity for moral

perfection. Grace is helpful but not indispensable. His position was condemned—but its condemnation was a *political* victory of the Augustinian party, not a philosophical refutation.

- Modern assessment. The concept of “grace” resolves nothing. It is a placeholder for the mystery of why some believe and others do not—a mystery that naturalistic psychology (upbringing, temperament, social context) explains without supernatural residue.

7.3 Synthesis: The Reformation as Radicalised Incoherence

Sheet 19 — The Reformation’s Deepened Contradictions

Far from “purifying” Christianity, the Reformation *intensified* its deepest contradictions:

1. It replaced one authority with another. *Sola scriptura* did not liberate conscience; it substituted the authority of the pope with the authority of competing biblical interpreters. The result was not freedom but fragmentation: tens of thousands of Protestant denominations, each claiming the “plain sense” of the same text.
2. It deepened the moral abyss. Catholic theology, for all its faults, at least preserved a space for human moral effort. Calvinist predestination annihilates it. The Reformation’s God is *more* arbitrary, *more* cruel, and *more* indifferent to human striving than the medieval God it replaced.
3. It exposed the constructedness of doctrine. The very fact that Christianity could be so radically reinterpreted—that “the faith once delivered” was, in practice, endlessly mutable—is itself powerful evidence that Christian doctrine is a human construction, not a fixed divine revelation.

Conclusion

“We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world—its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it.”

— Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1927)

The purpose of these study sheets is not to promote hostility toward believers, but to demonstrate that the arguments **for** theism (and especially for the specific doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Protestantism) fail to meet the evidentiary and logical standards we apply to every other domain of human inquiry.

Where evidence is absent, reason is the only honest guide. Where contradictions abound, intellectual courage demands that we name them. And where doctrines cause suffering—eternal damnation, predestined reprobation, inherited guilt—moral decency demands that we reject them.

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