

Does Anyone in the Media Read the Bible?

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By Eric Metaxas

MANHATTAN, N.Y.—It happened again just the other day. I was reading the *New York Times* and I came across something so hilarious that for a moment it seemed to be some kind of joke. But this was in an obituary.

The obit was about one George Whitman, the proprietor of the famous Shakespeare and Company bookstore in Paris, who had just died at the hoary old age of 98. Before I mention the joke, I should say that I first got a mild chuckle when I read how George nurtured aspiring writers:

“For decades Mr. Whitman provided food and makeshift beds to young aspiring novelists or writing nomads, often letting them spend a night, a week, or even months living among the crowded shelves and alcoves.”

It made me wonder: Was George the true founder of OWS [Occupy Wall Street]?

But this was nothing compared with the hilarity to follow. What hilarity, you ask. It would come in the next two sentences.

Here they are: “[George] welcomed visitors with large-print messages on the walls. ‘Be not inhospitable to strangers, lest they be angels in disguise,’ was one, quoting Yeats.”

Yeats!? Did you catch that? I choked on my toast.

Did the *Times* actually just say that “Be not inhospitable to strangers, lest they be angels in disguise” was from Yeats?

Unless I had fallen down a rabbit hole, that quote was from the Bible. It’s from Hebrews 13:2 and it’s quite famous.

If you didn’t catch it, don’t feel too badly, because you are probably not the *New York Times*. You are probably not America’s “paper of record,” proud owner of 106 Pulitzer Prizes in journalism—more than any other newspaper. You probably don’t have squadrons of fact checkers on your payroll.

I still couldn’t believe what I’d just read, so I kept reading, looking for some explanation. There was none. I then shook the paper to make sure I was reading an actual newspaper, and not, say, an E-mail forward from an aged friend.

Nope. This really was the *New York Times*, the Old Grey Lady, whose motto was "All the News That's Fit to Print." And let's face it, if W.B. Yeats was the real author of the Bible's "Book of Hebrews" that really would be big news!

To be absolutely sure I wasn't dreaming, I read the passage to my wife. She screamed. I wasn't dreaming. The *New York Times* really had said that the poet W.B. Yeats was the author of a very famous Bible passage.

To be fair, the *New York Times* eventually issued a correction [on Dec. 21, 2011] about the Yeats quote. Here's what they said:

"An obituary on Thursday about George Whitman, the longtime owner of the Shakespeare & Company bookstore in Paris, referred incorrectly to a quotation written on a wall of his store. The words 'Be not inhospitable to strangers, lest they be angels in disguise' are a variation on a passage from the Bible; although Mr. Whitman himself attributed them to the poet W.B. Yeats, they were not written by Yeats."

But believe it or not, it wasn't just the *Times* (and the late Mr. Whitman) who got it wrong. It was also the Associated Press. NPR put up the AP version of their obituary right way. The BBC reported erroneously on the quote too.

Which leads me to two observations. First, have you ever heard the old adage "A lie goes around the world, before the truth can get its boots on"? Here's yet another example of the truth in that statement, especially in this hyper-electronic age.

Second, it's no secret that Manhattan and Hollywood cultural elites are deeply secular. There's a reason many of them consider the middle of America "fly-over country."

Many secular elites think those who actually read the Bible need to be educated away from such nonsense. So the ignorance they often show about religion can be staggering. I remember two prominent instances.

■ The first was when I heard that patting-ourselves-on-the-back anthem "We Are the World" on FM radio 25 years ago.

In his solo, Willie Nelson warbled: "As God has shown us, by turning stone to bread . . ." Did Willie really sing that Jesus had turned stone into bread? Yikes. Um, that's not quite what happened, Willie.

What actually happened was that Jesus refused to turn stone to bread. And do you remember who tried to get him to turn stone to bread? That's right, Willie. It was, um, Satan, as in Lucifer. As in it was a bad idea.

Keep in mind that this wasn't something he blurted out over the reefer smoke at a concert. That knee-slapping lyric was written down and gone over and over. Who knows how many of those celebrities heard it and never batted an eye? That's how out of touch the vast majority of Hollywood celebrities are with basic Sunday school knowledge.

■ The second was when a secular Manhattan friend revealed that he didn't know who had come up with the Golden Rule.

When told it was Jesus (Matthew 7:12) he didn't believe it. And this is a brilliant man, who knows just about everything there is to know.

But, in the world of Manhattan cultural elites, the Bible is mostly thought of as a quaint and useless artifact, like that old colonial butter churn near the fireplace in your country home. Did it really ever make butter?

In part to remedy this inequality, I've started something called Socrates in the City, where the "big questions" are considered from a generally biblical point of view. But that's another story.

To get back to the faux-Yeats quote, remember that we are not talking about Willie Nelson or about a friend of mine. We are talking about the *New York Times*.

Yes, they have a generally secular and liberal bias, but this was a factual error and the *Times* has fact checkers. So, if by some fluke the writer of the obit had been raised in Soviet Russia where no one was permitted to read or speak about the Bible, then surely one of the *Times's* notoriously fastidious fact checkers would have caught this tremendous goof.

Besides, this obit must have been written years before, as such obits usually are, waiting quietly in the files for their elderly subjects to pass on. It would have been dusted off every few years and updated and—presumably—rechecked.

So when I read the Yeats supergoof I wondered: Where were the fact checkers?

Is the secular bias at the *Times* so pervasive that it has affected not just the writers but the fact checkers too?

Or has being out of touch with middle America so hurt the *Times's* subscription base that they cannot afford fact checkers anymore?

When I first wrote about this on my Facebook page I was excoriated by an acquaintance who writes for the *Times*. He thought I was simply being too harsh. Perhaps I was. After all, as Sammy Davis Jr. once remarked, "Judge not, lest ye be judged."

But, to get serious, if I had one wish for Americans in 2012, I wish that we would get to know the Bible better. Even if you aren't a believer there are incredible stories in the "good book" that I guarantee you will keep you glued to the page.

The Bible is no less a part of our cultural heritage than Shakespeare is—and, by the way, Shakespeare's plays are absolutely loaded with biblical references.

In the meantime, the biblical author of Hebrews was on to something when he wrote about angels in disguise. So take his advice: Be hospitable to all you meet. And keep your eyes open for disguised angels.