

Is the Bible fact?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Well before Spinoza's *"Tractatus Theologicus Politicus"* (1670) Christian thinkers and rational philosophers, like Hobbes, began to challenge the authorship and validity of the Bible. Questions arose in both the Jewish and the Christian worlds as to whether all of the Bible stories in the Old or New Testaments actually happened the way they were written. In the following centuries, as the Enlightenment overturned the authority of the Church and focused almost entirely on scientific, empirical evidence, it became an article of rational faith that everything in the Bible was fantasy, invention. But now we are less certain. The dogmas of the Enlightenment did as much harm to humanity as good (see [*The Dark Side of the Enlightenment by Yoram Hazony*](#)). We are increasingly discovering that in many cases, the Biblical narratives have some authenticity and some basis in fact even if the precise evidence is still missing.

Religions, when their received ideas are challenged, have always retreated behind the defensive walls of faith—as in the case of Galileo, insisting against all the evidence that he was wrong and forcing him to retract. Otherwise relying on the famous maxim of the early Church Father Tertullian: *Credo Quia Absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd).

In fact, that's not what he said or meant. He said rather, *"Certum est, Quia impossibile,"* meaning that because it sounds to us so impossible, that is why I am certain. The mystical aspects of religion consciously try to offer another perspective to rationalism. When Nietzsche said that "God is dead", he meant that the authority of religion that had controlled, bullied, and censored Western intellectual life for a thousand years had lost its force. The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard insisted that religion required a leap of faith, rather than a rational justification. But of course, the danger of leaps of faith is that they can lead one to jump off a cliff. People have and do believe in the most absurd and dangerous ideas. Just think how superstitious most human beings are.

Which is why I have always argued for a combination of both faith and reason. One cannot live by logic alone. Great passions would otherwise be invalidated. But neither can one dispense with logic to clarify the dangerous from the benign. To get one to think and consider before one jumps off the roof, or takes poison, or kills other human beings just because one believes it to be the right thing to do.

I accept the Torah because it is such a remarkable document. It "speaks to me." It seems to me to transcend normal parameters of judgment, and I can almost hear God talking to me through it. Its narratives are pregnant with meaning and lessons. But that does not mean I cannot see many different and contradictory ways of reading and understanding it, literal, metaphorical and symbolic. After all the rabbis agree that "the Torah speaks in human language." I am not saying that whether it is historically accurate or not is

uninteresting, quite the contrary. But that ultimately its surface reading is not a condition of my faith. The Bible is a record of the human struggle to understand God and God's direction to mankind. It is not a scientific or objective record.

The Torah may talk about the finger of God. But God has no fingers or hands. Doesn't get angry or suffer from jealousy in the way we humans do. Man was not made out of earth, although life might originally have emerged from it. The world is much older than 5,778 years, and a day before the sun was created could not have been one of our days. The narratives are there for the message, the moral. Science changes. Facts change. Its core message—an ordered, disciplined way of living—is as valid today as it was then, even if conditions and realities have changed. If I call it Divine, it is because it is unlike anything else I experience. Back to Tertullian. It is Divine because it is so impressive and as much ahead of its time as it is a product of its time.

I do not mind one way or another if history proves what the Bible says happened. Yet more and more books and articles and propaganda film clips and programs are insisting that there is evidence that certain specific Biblical narratives are actually true. In fact, most of them prove nothing of the sort. But the evidence we now have, does demonstrate that the general historical background resonates and is authentic. There were floods and famines. Waters can be divided by forces of nature. There were catastrophes, manmade and natural. Peoples were enslaved and then freed. Empires rose and fell. Creative individuals achieve positions of power. Many more were killed. The alphabet emerged at about the time that Jewish laws began to be written down. And Abraham was a common name in Mesopotamia. He probably read Hammurabi's code and liked riding donkeys.

We know about the upheavals of Mediterranean society around 3,000 years ago. Of the collapse of Greece, of the invasions of sea peoples, of the changes in Egyptian dynasties. The Hyksos invasion of Egypt. All background to migrations, changes in dynasties, and "a new Pharaoh who did not want to know Joseph."

Sigmund Freud in his "Moses and Monotheism" wanted to place Moses as the follower of Akhenaten, who tried to revolutionize Egyptian religion, scrapping all gods except the Sun. When he died, Moses looked around for another audience, found the Israelites, became their leader, imposed a new religion on them, took them out of Egypt, and then they killed him for trying to insist on too many laws. Freud's idea of wanting to kill your father because he stands in your way. No one takes this very seriously nowadays. Any more than we can rely on the third century BCE Egyptian monk Manetho, who gives his version of the Israelites as a group of diseased slaves who set out to destroy Egypt. But you can come up with all kinds of theories.

New evidence has, it seems, discovered chariots and human remains in the Red Sea. Were these the doomed chariots that pursued the Israelites? Were the Hapiru the Hebrews? Maybe yes, but unlikely. Hebrews were Ivriim, not Hipriim. Evidence of massive famines might or might not have been the ones Joseph referred to. Or later references to earlier events like Mesopotamian

floods. They are theories.

The History Channel has program after program that comes up with theories of extraterrestrial involvement in human affairs. They all follow a similar formula: "If the pyramids could not have been built by humans, then could it not be possible that they were built by the men from outer space?" But the fact is that humans could and did build them, and we do know how. Erich von Däniken sold over 85 million copies of his books claiming to prove that spacemen visited earth regularly. As Neil deGrasse Tyson (who does not reject the theoretical possibility of life elsewhere) recently said: "I will believe in men from space coming to earth when I get an invitation to lunch with one."

The reason we don't have evidence of much that is in the Bible is because 3,000 years ago something was not likely to survive unless it was in stone. Bones and artifacts have been buried for eons under dust and rubble, and picked over by scavengers. We don't have the sorts of records that the Romans left or medieval historians. But even they are notoriously unreliable. I we do have an inscription from King Hezekiah's reign. And the House of David, because they can be seen, today, inscribed in stone. The Gezer Calendar tells us about early seasons and festivals nearly 3,000 years ago. The Mesha Stele refers to Israelites and so do Assyrian artifacts. But until one sees Moses's autograph, who he actually was remains a historical mystery, even if he lives in my heart and mind every waking minute of my day.

What is God's role in all this? I do not know. But Divine intervention, even if unprovable, certainly seems to me to explain the survival of the Jews against such odds. I am pleased that archaeology seems to validate much of the biblical background, but my faith does not stand or fall on the discoveries of archaeologists.