

Most rabbis think Passover and other Old Testament stories are fiction  
John Zande, April 2016

**Biblical stories are a brilliant mix of myth, cultural memories and kernels of historical truth.**

How do Christians and Muslims harmonize their faiths in light of the awkward realization that their central figures of devotion, supposedly inspired sages, were unable to distinguish between historical fact and inventive fiction? "Would you willingly lie to your children?" asks Rabbi Adam Chalom, Ph.D. "Would you say this is what happened when you know this is not what happened? There's an ethical question there."

Rabbi Chalom is referring to the popular belief that the Jewish foundation narrative detailed in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) chronicles actual historical events. In fact it's been known among biblical archaeologists for nearly three generations that the Five Books of Moses (the Torah) and the Deuteronomistic History of the Nevi'im (including the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel) are no more a literal account of the early history of the Jewish people than J. R. R. Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*, is a literal account of World War 1.

"The truth is out there," continues Rabbi Chalom. "They'll find this archaeological, evidence-based version of Jewish history... and then they'll say, why did you lie to me?"

Broad Consensus that Passover is Mythology

Rabbi Chalom's explicit dismissal of the veracity of the bible might seem an aberration to many not versed in biblical criticism, but he in fact represents the consensus position in all but orthodox movements of Judaism. Rabbis today concede (although rarely announce) that the Patriarchs tales are simple mythology, that the Israelites were never in Egypt, that Moses was a legendary motif not found in history, and that there was never an Exodus nor a triumphant military conquest of Canaan.

This confession strikes to the heart of one of the most profoundly uncomfortable historical readjustments this century will likely witness. Redefining the early history of the Jewish people means, after all, also redefining the very foundation slab of two of the world's most popular theological systems – Christianity and Islam – replacing words like "historical," "genuine," and "actual" with words such as "fiction," "fable," and "myth".

"The Pentateuch is the Jewish Mythology," states Israeli Rabbi, Nardy Grün, one of over sixty rabbis from every movement in Judaism I reached out to for this article. "My duty as a Rabbi is to interpret the Bible and consider it as my Mythology," Grün continues, "as the founding story of the people of Israel, of course not to take it literally... it is not a book of facts, but a myth."

An "extended metaphor" is how Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism described the view of the bible held by most rabbis today. "The Torah is not a book we turn to for historical accuracy," noted Newsweek's Most Influential Rabbi in America (2012), Conservative Rabbi, David Wolpe.

"Most Reform rabbis and Jews agree that the biblical text is not to be taken literally or word-for-word," confirmed Reform Rabbi Victor Appell. "The Pentateuch is filled with wonderful mythology of our beginnings," attested Rabbi Robert Schreiber. "The Torah is a piece of human literature," professed

Humanistic Rabbi, Jeffrey Falick of The Birmingham Temple. "Its stories are fictional and that is how I teach them."

"Some people are surprised, even upset, by these views, yet they are not new," wrote Rabbi Wolpe in a 2002 article, *Did the Exodus Really Happen?* "Not piety but timidity keeps many rabbis from expressing what they have long understood to be true."

Understanding something does not, however, necessarily translate to that same thing being enthusiastically embraced. Wolpe recounts a (nameless) Jewish scholar who while scolding him publically in print took him aside over a lunch one day and privately confessed: "Of course what you say is true, but we should not say it publically."

What this nameless scholar was admitting to be true, but which he bemoaned being spoken aloud, was truly nothing more than what the world's leading biblical archaeologists had been saying for decades. As written by famed Israeli archaeologist, Professor Ze'ev Herzog of Tel Aviv University in the foreword to his 1999 essay, *Deconstructing the Walls of Jericho*: "The patriarchs' acts are legendary stories, we did not sojourn in Egypt or make an exodus, we did not conquer the land ... Those who take an interest have known these facts for years".

Reviewing Herzog's paper, Professor Magen Broshi, chief archaeologist at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, stated, "There is no serious scholar in Israel or in the world who does not accept this position. Herzog represents a large group of Israeli scholars, and he stands squarely within the consensus. Twenty years ago even I wrote of the same matters and I was not an innovator. Archaeologists simply do not take the trouble of bringing their discoveries to public attention."

#### How Hebrew Scholars Determined the Story is Mythos

Archaeology is a difficult science to be so confident about, and the unusual solidness of the consensus here reflects a century of exhaustive archaeological work conducted across Israel and its environs, including the Sinai and Jordanian hills into which archaeologists poured after the 1967 Six Day War. Albeit unexpectedly, it was work that dismantled the general thesis that existed in the early 20th Century which assumed a core historical validity to the biblical narratives concerning the early history of the Jews.

"Slowly, cracks began to appear in the picture," explained Herzog in his essay:

"Paradoxically, a situation was created in which the glut of findings began to undermine the historical credibility of the biblical descriptions instead of reinforcing them. A crisis stage was reached when the theories within the framework of the general thesis were unable to solve an increasingly large number of anomalies. The explanations became ponderous and inelegant, and the pieces did not fit together smoothly."

As more information was unearthed, the collapse of the thesis became relatively simple to explain: the greater part of the Masoretic Text was a work of geopolitical fiction conceived of and promoted to service 7th and 6th Century BCE territorial and theological ambitions. The aim of the authors was not to document actual historical events, but rather invent them in a legendary time so as to fit the aspirations of Judah and its Yahwehist priests after the sacking of Mamlakhet Yisra'el (Kingdom of Israel) by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

“There is no archaeological evidence for any of it,” declared renowned Israeli archaeologist and professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University, Israel Finkelstein. “This is something unexampled in history. They [Judah] wanted to seize control of the territories of the kingdom of Israel and annex them, because, they said, ‘These territories are actually ours and if you have a minute, we’ll tell you how that’s so.’”

The true story of the early Jews, the story revealed through detailed population maps, settlement patterns, archaeological digs, and comparisons of biblical and Egyptian texts, was not one of a once enslaved people returning to Canaan, rather a people who never left; hill-people, 11th Century BCE refugees from Canaanite coastal states who created a culture and economy that would ultimately be unified as the nation of Israel.

“Scholars have known these things for a long time, but we’ve broken the news very gently,” explained one of America’s leading archaeologists, Professor William Dever.

“No archaeological evidence of a massive migration of Jews from Egypt across the Sinai Peninsula to Israel has been found and the biblical account of Jewish origins is, at best, historical fiction: sometimes plausible, but generally imagined,” states historian and biblical archaeologist, Professor Carol Meyers of Duke University. It is a concession mirrored in the second edition Encyclopaedia Judaica which concludes that the entire Exodus narrative was “dramatically woven out of various strands of tradition... he [Moses] wasn’t a historical character.”

“We looked for evidence for the Exodus in the Sinai Desert and found there was nothing in the Sinai Desert,” explains Rabbi Chalom. “We looked at the Patriarch stories and the times in which they supposedly lived, and it didn’t seem to match. Then we looked at the stories of the Patriarchs in the time they were apparently written, historically, and that matched much better.”

“Biblical tales are not so much descriptions of real events as they are propaganda for political and religious arguments which took place many centuries after the presumed events took place,” wrote Rabbi Wine in his posthumously published book, *A Provocative People*. “The story of Abraham has less to do with 1800 BCE, when Abraham presumably lived, than with 700 BCE when his story was created.”

#### Shockwaves as Believers Adjusts to the Change

The strength of this new understanding is so overwhelming that the word “myth” has now even breached the rigid walls of Orthodox Judaism. In early 2012 Orthodox Rabbi Norman Solomon published, *Torah from Heaven: The Reconstruction of Faith*, in which he presented the case that the concept of Torah Mi Sinai (the claim that the Five Books of Moses were dictated by the god Yahweh to Moses on Sinai) was not rooted in reality but was rather a “foundation myth;” an origin dream, not a descriptive historical fact.

The admission sent shockwaves through the Orthodox world not felt since the one-time candidate for Chief Rabbi of Britain, Rabi Louis Jacobs, delicately suggested that Torah Mi Sinai was a “complex idea with textual, historical, and philosophical problems that needed to be addressed.” Fifty years later, Solomon’s conclusions have drawn analogous and strikingly harsh criticism from influential Orthodox groups including the Vaad Harabonim, a cluster of Canada’s most prominent Orthodox rabbis, who publically denounced the British rabbi and accused him of ‘kefiroh baTorah’ [heresy].

Such severe criticism is however thoroughly contrasted by Conservative Rabbi Steven Leder who said in 2001, “Defending a rabbi in the 21st century for saying the Exodus story isn’t factual is like defending him

for saying the Earth isn't flat. It's neither new nor shocking to most of us that the Earth is round or that the Torah isn't a history book dictated to Moses by God on Mount Sinai."

Literal interpretation of the Bible is what Rabbi Karen Levy describes as being "radically un-self-aware," yet for many Orthodox rabbis the inexplicable contradictions have meant a choice between participating in the evidence-based world or that of the poetic, unsubstantiated narrative.

Willful ignorance is an unsustainable and ultimately unacceptable response. "The truth is out there" attests Rabbi Chalom, and this truth binds both the Christian and Islamic faiths; religions whose foundations are rooted to the history of the Jewish people. How does an Abrahamic theology reconcile itself with the news that there was no Abraham, no Moses, no Exodus, and no Conquest? How does one re-categorize a revealed religion when there evidently was no revelation? How do Christians and Muslims harmonize their faiths in light of the tremendously awkward realization that their central figures of devotion, supposedly inspired sages, were unable to distinguish between historical fact and inventive fiction?\*

It is a far-reaching, deeply penetrating catechism that will weigh heavily on 21st century Western (and Middle Eastern) religious practice and, ultimately, redefine its validity and reception in our societies. And with that we return to the question posed at the beginning. As popular culture catches up to the educated, evidence-based position of Jewish rabbis who concede that Abrahamic faiths are built on myth: Would you willingly lie to your children? Would you say this is what happened when you know this is not what happened?

\*In Islam, Musa (Moses) is considered a prophet and is named 136 times in the Qur'an. Abraham is named 69 times. In the New Testament, Moses is mentioned 85 times with Jesus naming him in Luke 3:8, John 5:45 and twice in Matthew. Abraham is mentioned 75 times with Jesus specifically identifying him eighteen times in John 8 alone.

John Zande is the author of *The Owner of all Infernal Names: an Introductory Treatise on the Existence, Nature, and Government of our Omnimalevolent Creator*, a parody of 19th Century natural theology works. He blogs at *The Superstitious Naked Ape*.