

Did the Exodus Really Happen? Does It Matter?

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Rabbi David Wolpe is one of the great rabbis of our time, a prolific writer with a significant following at his Los Angeles Conservative synagogue and around the world. More than once, Rabbi Wolpe has made the front pages of national newspapers, but none so significantly as the time, several years ago, when Rabbi Wolpe told his congregation that the Exodus from Egypt might never have happened.

Heresy! Making matters worse, Rabbi Wolpe delivered this sermon on Passover morning, to a synagogue packed with holiday worshipers. The throngs thought that they had gathered to celebrate the Exodus. Instead, they heard their Rabbi tell them that the blessed event is likely fiction, all this from a Conservative Rabbi, no less than a former professor at the Conservative Movement's rabbinical seminary. Heresy, indeed!

A storm of protest rolled through the Jewish world and beyond it. Religious leaders of various faiths lambasted Wolpe. How could a teacher of biblical truth deny the historical accuracy of the Bible? The noted Jewish writer and personality, Dennis Prager, also of Los Angeles, claimed that Wolpe's sermon undermines the very foundation of Judaism. If God did not liberate the Israelites from Egypt, and did not give our ancestors the Torah at Mount Sinai, there is no warrant for the observance of Judaism.

More recently, the same controversy has roiled Reform Judaism, albeit more quietly. Wolpe, along with my own Bible professor, Dr. David Sperling, wrote in *Reform Judaism* magazine that the Exodus likely never happened. In recent weeks, though, the *Reform Judaism* magazine that arrived at our homes included a rebuttal of sorts from Richard Elliot Friedman, author of *Who Wrote the Bible?* Still, even Friedman only claims that a small if powerful group of Israelites left Egyptian bondage, and that the story is embellished to include all the Children of Israel.

Contemplating our own reactions to the controversy, let's examine the evidence. The truth be told, there is precious little undisputed evidence of the Exodus, beyond the biblical account. Friedman points to the similarity between the Tabernacle of the Torah and certain Temples uncovered by archeologists in Egypt. Suffice it to say, though, that with all that has been uncovered in ancient Egypt, no hieroglyphs tell of the escape of a group of Hebrew slaves.

Some recent biblical scholarship suggests an alternative theory behind the entire Exodus account. Some, like Dr. David Aaron, a professor at our Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, have suggested that the Exodus story was written as a parable. The real villain, they say, might have been King Solomon. Known as the wisest of monarchs, King Solomon might also have been a repressive tyrant. His critics would not, and could not, have written negatively about him. To criticize their own oppressive ruler would be the kiss of death. Therefore, those antagonists wrote a story in which the menace of the Jewish people is not their own King, but an Egyptian Pharaoh. The liberator, of course, is God, who frees people from all oppression. The message might have been this: God will free the Children of Israel from all tyranny, even from a tyrannical Israelite King, just as God liberates the Israelites from Pharaoh in the story of the Exodus.

So, who is right: those who insist that the Exodus is history, or those who argue that it is a parable, meant to convey a critically important message, but not a historical incident?

Well, on the one hand, Rabbi Wolpe's critics, like Dennis Prager, are correct when they say that the Exodus is a fundamental foundation on which Judaism stands. The Exodus teaches us that God is our

saving Power. Whether we be enslaved by Pharaoh or by alcohol; whether we be imprisoned by a tyrant or by poverty; whether we be shackled by our government or by disease, God desires our liberation.

Moreover, the Exodus reminds us that God is our Parent and Teacher. If we are blessed in this world, our earthly parents love us and instruct us in the ways of life. They nurture us and they discipline us, so that we may make our way in this world. Similarly, God is known to us in the Exodus as a loving Parent who sustains the Children of Israel in the desert and offers them the Torah. Our performance of God's commandments depends on our acceptance of God's loving rule and our acknowledgment of God's authority to govern us. Those, too, are among the central teachings of the Exodus.

We would be horrified to learn that God is not our saving power. We would be bewildered by a Rabbi who would suggest that God is not our loving Protector. We would be scandalized to hear from the pulpit that God possesses no prerogative to lead us. Therefore, we must affirm: God is the Source of our Salvation. God is Avinu, Malkeinu, our heavenly Parent, our eternal Ruler. The Exodus is true.

But did it happen? Is the story of the Exodus a historical fact? Now, that is an entirely different question.

By analogy, let us examine the story of creation. While scholars may not have a definitive position on the historicity of the Exodus, science does instruct us that creation did not happen the way the Bible describes it. In my experience, most adult Jews, and especially most teenagers, do not think that the creation account in Genesis is accurate. Most often, I have heard people say that Genesis 1 is "not true."

But is God not our Creator? Granting, as we do, that scientists are correct when they describe the big bang and evolution, may we not justifiably ask: What is ultimately the Source of matter? Whence came the natural laws that our science books describe so well? I do believe that God is our Creator, even as I accept the teachings of Darwin and the cosmologists. And I also embrace the most important teaching of the first chapter of Genesis: that every single human being is created equal, in the image of God.

Temples and Synagogues, like Churches and Mosques, are filled with faithful men and women who do not accept the historical or scientific accuracy of the Bible's creation story. We are not fundamentalists. We are also not atheists. Most of us are not even agnostics. Instead, we are Jews who believe in God, who learn life's most powerful messages from the Torah, and who also learn about the world around us from the greatest thinkers of humankind.

Why should we treat the Exodus any differently?

In fact, we invite disaster when we insist that the Bible be treated as a history book. If we require that a good Jew believe that all the stories in the Torah actually happened, we are likely to turn away a good number of our most faithful people. Teenagers, in particular, are often skeptical of the accuracy of Bible stories. They are quick to conclude that Judaism is bogus, since its central stories do not hold up under the lens of historical scrutiny. May we be blessed with the courage of Rabbi Wolpe, who stood before his congregation and affirmed his faith in the truth of Torah, even as he questioned the historicity of its most important narrative. Just like Rabbi Wolpe, we are able to say to our young people: The Torah is not a history book or a science text, but so much more. The Bible communicates the most important lessons known to humanity.

May we ever derive meaning from the Exodus, whether it happened or not. May we find revelation in every word of Torah.

Amen.