



Are we promoting an exodus from one religion to another?

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Much of the current brouhaha about the Exodus, especially roiling the Jewish community in Los Angeles recently, has percolated up from this year's publication of *The Bible Unearthed*, a tour de force of recent archaeological findings and their meaning vis-à-vis the narrative of the Hebrew Bible.

The authors, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, offer a challenging vision and scientific framework for assessing the biblical narrative.

Their book's sub-title, however, is "Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts"—and we would do well to take the authors at their word. This is a "new vision," full of theoretical possibilities, but not a statement of final proofs in a controlled scientific experiment.

In fact, it may more accurately represent an exodus from one religion to another, because the

authors' scientific vision incorporates an implicit *theology*, the acceptance of which is necessary to negate the historicity of the biblical narrative.

At the outset we are informed that "the historical saga contained in the Bible . . . was not a miraculous revelation, but a brilliant product of the human imagination."

The idea is that the biblical conception was created centuries after the Exodus itself. The archaeological evidence is that ancient Israel did not attain full development until sometime near the end of the eighth century BCE. Thus the substance of the biblical narrative is said to be a product of King Josiah's reign, and the Exodus and other biblical stories are not history but "creative expressions of a powerful religious reform movement that flourished in the kingdom of Judah in the Late Iron Age."

The authors ask: “Is there any evidence that the patriarchs . . . actually lived?” Their answer is that “. . . the search for the historical patriarchs was ultimately unsuccessful.” They confidently inform us: “archaeology *completely disproved* the contention that a sudden, massive population movement [from Mesopotamia toward Canaan] had taken place at that time.” (Our emphasis.) As for the 40 years in the wilderness, we learn that “there is simply no such evidence at the supposed time of the Exodus in the thirteenth century BCE” and “the conclusion—that the Exodus did not happen at the time and in the manner described in the Bible—seems irrefutable. . . .” They similarly characterize the evidence for the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites.

Finally, we learn that “although these [biblical] stories may have been based on certain historical kernels, they primarily reflect the ideology and world-view of the [much later eighth century] writers.”

The authors assure us that the biblical narrative cannot be taken as history, because over the years archaeologists have discovered the “main locales” of biblical history: “After decades of excavation, researchers have been able to reconstruct the vast archaeological context into which biblical history must be fit. . . . [and] there were too many contradictions between the archaeological finds and the biblical narratives to suggest that the Bible provided a precise description of what actually occurred.”

Why has this “new vision” of archaeology suddenly emerged in our time?

What has changed dramatically is the focus of biblical archaeology so as to “reverse the relationship between artifact and biblical text.” No longer do archaeologists attempt to confirm biblical narrative. Instead, they seek to uncover the “human realities that lay behind the text.”

What about those “older kernels of historical truth”? When were the basic stories first written?

Finkelstein and Silberman conclude that “the main outlines of the story were certainly known long before . . .” [the seventh century]. They go on to say: “The saga of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt is neither historical truth nor literary fiction. It is a powerful expression of memory and hope born in a world in the midst of change.”

So what are we to think about our traditions in the light of archaeology’s “new vision”?

The book contains a fascinating survey of archaeological findings, which in turn is the fuel for theoretical speculation about the ancient world, speculation that largely contradicts the biblical

narrative. Much of this speculation is informed by archeological evidence and plausible, suggesting the need to reformulate biblical history within the framework of archaeological discoveries.

But Finkelstein and Silberman go on to make their case by the *absence* of direct evidence—to wit: “there is no recognizable archaeological evidence of Israelite presence in Egypt before that time. . . . [and] we have no clue, not even a single word, about early Israelites in Egypt. . . .”

So there’s the “final nail in the coffin” of biblical history—but it’s also the rub with this book. With its triumphant declaration that there is no archaeological evidence of the Exodus, we have the covert introduction of a *theology* of science: the *belief* that the absence of scientific evidence proves the absence of existence.

Is it, in fact, critical that the evidence uncovered in Egypt to date fails to reveal any proof of the “Israelite” presence there before the time of the Exodus?

Why should there be any such evidence? The evidence we do have suggests that at that time Am Yisrael was not seen as a distinct nation but a marginal socio-economic class. Why, then, would the ancient producers of archaeological artifacts have reflected or given attention to a slave class? Moreover, the emergence of Am Yisrael—our transformation from “mixed multitude” to Israelite nation—can only be said to have occurred with *matan* Torah, the giving and receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai.

Finkelstein and Silberman tell us that, “the escape of more than a tiny group from Egyptian control seems *highly unlikely*, as is the crossing of the desert and entry into Canaan.” [Our emphasis.] If, however, one wanted to exclude from the history of the Jewish people any episode that failed to meet this standard of “likelihood,” it would be necessary to reject most of our history. With Jewish history, plausibility can never be the test for historical veracity.

The authors note that the escape of slaves from Egypt would require crediting “the possibility of divinely inspired miracles.” We imagine this to be barely disguised ridicule of biblical history. Possibly they mean to suggest that accepting the heart of the biblical account demands groundless religious faith in contrast to their own disciplined scientific method.

Once again their theology intrudes itself: the idea that there is no existence without scientific evidence. It raises a question for every reader of this new archaeological evidence. Should we understand and accept science, not as an informative,

knowledge-producing methodology, with the demonstrated potential to lift up the quality of human life, but as *religion*?

Are we prepared to accept from this theology of science that there is no power or existence beyond the reach of scientific evidence? If science has no evidence for the existence of God, the soul, love, or whatever, must all such phenomena be said not to exist? If so, we will have made science into religion and its practitioners into high priests. In doing so we will have accepted their claim for infallibility, omniscience and omnipotence—the arrogant fiction that science knows everything or that everything can be known by science. But the last century’s scientifically driven catastrophes of mass death and the thousands of *outdated science books* annually culled from the shelves of libraries put the lie to that idea.

Isaac Asimov, the world’s premiere science fiction writer—“the greatest explainer of the age” according to famed cosmologist Carl Sagan—wrote that, “. . . In every century people have thought they understood the Universe at last, and in every century they were proved to be wrong. It follows that the one thing we can say about our modern ‘knowledge’ is that it is wrong.”

Yet the faith that some devotees of science place in the latest oracle from the bamot or “high places” of scientific inquiry (e.g., universities and

research centers) suggests mindlessness comparable to that which the emerging priesthood of archaeologists ascribes to anyone who credits as more than myth the 3,000-year tradition of our people.

Before we trade the old religion for the new, we also might want to ask ourselves: What wisdom, moral vision, and hope does this new religion hold out for us?

What, finally, are we confronting here? Does the recent archaeological evidence, on balance, compel those of us who accept science and reason to reject the heart of our religious tradition—the Exodus from Egypt and *mattan* Torah? The question is deeply disturbing because, just possibly, some of us may feel compelled by our convictions as modern people to jettison the core of traditional beliefs that define us as Jews.

But not in the remotest reaches of modern science is there any compelling argument to be made for dropping our wisdom and legal tradition. For those of us who find no inherent conflict between the scientific method and religious wisdom and law, the recent findings and speculations of archaeology would get much less attention and be much less controversial if their enthusiasts presented them as current findings and speculations rather than immutable truth.

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