
Understanding Ancient Texts

The things that you're liable to think about the bible ain't necessarily so

BY RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK

My favorite articulation of biblical skepticism is not found in any essay on religious belief. It's a product of the American stage, a song performed by the character Sporting Life in George and Ira Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*. "It ain't necessarily so," he intones in the opening stanza. "The things that we're liable to read in the Bible, ain't necessarily so." I only recently realized that – while the story may be set in a 1930's Black community in South Carolina – the Gershwins quite purposefully set those words to a common melody for the Jewish blessing over the Torah. Before embracing Humanistic Judaism, I chanted it uncountable times. Now I can't help musing over what would have happened if just once I would have substituted its pieties with my own chanted announcement that what we were about to read "ain't necessarily so!"

This little flight of fantasy does not spring from a disregard for the Bible. I am both a student and teacher of its texts, dismayed by how much of what people are learning about the Bible "ain't necessarily so." As a Humanistic rabbi, it's not my place to tell religious Jews to disregard their attachments to it as a source of eternally relevant wisdom. Yet I can't help being concerned that their claims about its enduring values are a big part of what turns people like us away from

it. We are, after all, the rebellious ones, and claims about the Bible stand very much at the center of our dissent.

Though I don't frequently attend conventional synagogue services, on the odd occasion when I do – and especially during the Torah service – I become intensely aware of this. That's when the congregation lovingly removes the scroll from its ark, raising it reverently for all to see. It is, for them, an *Etz Chaim* – a Tree of Life. For Jews like us, not so much. Consequently, we head off in the opposite direction, often rejecting it entirely. Yet when we do, we perform a disservice to our Jewish journeys and ourselves because the Bible does not belong to the God-worshiping segments of the Jewish people alone. It is our inheritance, too.

Though our ways of approaching it will not include pious veneration, the Bible remains as central to our Jewish heritage as it is for all committed Jews. It is the founding document of Jewish history, the singular body of literature that we all share, and the nexus of all Judaisms past and present. And, somewhat delightfully, when we explore it with our secular sensibilities, we are exposed to layers of meaning only recently uncovered by modern scholars who are discovering long-untold stories behind the Bible's tales (and laws and teachings

and more). For all these reasons and more, I have committed myself to the goal of increasing biblical literacy among Secular Humanistic Jews.

One of the challenges that comes with this undertaking has been figuring out just where to begin! Sadly, even after they clear the hurdle of accepting its significance to our Jewish lives, there remains the problem of biblical ignorance. Though there are some Humanistic Jews with a good background in the literature, most know very little apart from barely-remembered and out-of-context Sunday school stories. For this reason, I always choose to begin with the most basic question: What do we mean when we talk about the Bible?

Though people tend to speak about it as a unified text, it is absolutely not. It is an anthology, a collection of twenty-four books with texts that may date as far back as 3,200 years. These books feature a variety of styles. Much of it is prosaic narrative, but a great deal of it also consists of poetry, proverbs, exhortations, and legalisms, to name just a few. Not one of the books is the work of a single author. And many – notably the five books of the Torah itself – contain multiple sources that underwent years of supplementation and editorial revisions before reaching their final forms. All the Bible's books were altered or modified in one way or another as they passed through editorial and scribal hands.

For most of Jewish (and Christian) history, few people recognized the complexities of the Bible's composition, failing to notice that there had been any serious editorial process at all. In the Torah, for example, they saw only a well-organized chronological account opening with the creation of the world and concluding with the death of Moses on the eve of the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land. Tradition generally ascribed authorship of the Torah to Moses himself. In the 17th century, Jewish philosopher Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza challenged this claim in the first truly critical analysis of the Torah's authorship. Others would follow in time.

What motivated the academics who studied of the Torah (and the entire Bible)

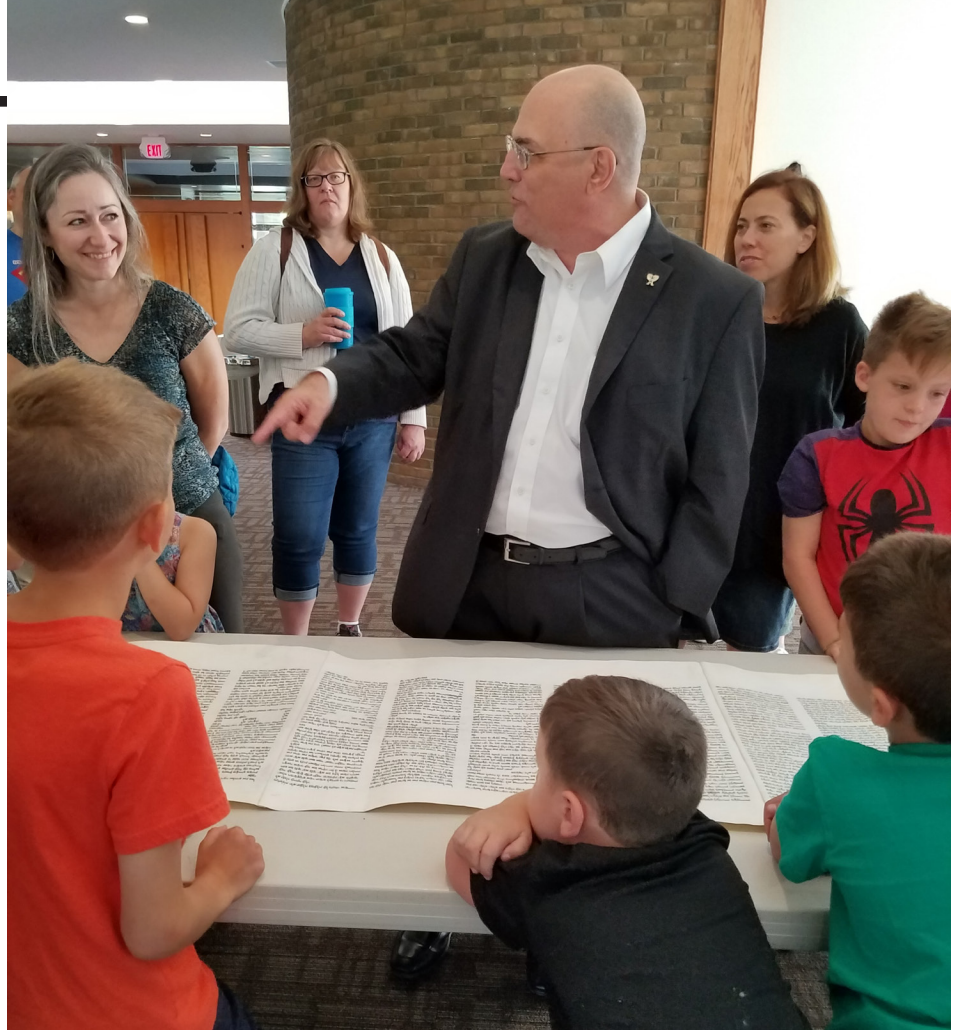
was a desire to explain its many irregularities, including numerous contradictions and repetitions and chronological aberrations. In fact, these issues were well known to pre-modern scholars of the text. Spinoza even cites some. Yet far from inviting earlier interpreters to treat the Bible as the human-created document that it is, they saw in its anomalies a divine invitation to explore deeper secrets.

Even today, when many believers (including some Modern Orthodox Jews) have finally accepted human authorship of the texts, religious Jews prefer to take a dualistic approach to the texts; one that allows them to consider the Bible to be divinely inspired and wholly human at the same time. As the old Yiddish saying goes, they are attempting to dance at two weddings with one tuchus. This allows them to continue to search the Bible for modern divine guidance even as they also acknowledge that its outrageous immoralities clearly reveal the flawed moral reasoning of the ancient human beings who wrote it.

Humanistic Jews (and other secular people) are uninterested in this two-fold approach. We do not deny that the Torah and rest of the Bible are accounts of Israelite-Jewish understandings of God. We simply reject the idea that we must continue treating them as a “living text” to which we can turn for guidance. This is why we reject the practice of “kosherizing” it through clever interpretations that can twist its plain meanings into any lessons we desire.

However, I should note that rejecting its divine provenance does not render the text entirely irrelevant to modern discourse. Even as a Humanistic rabbi, I use it all the time. For example, when I advocate for immigrant rights, I talk about the Torah’s insistence upon treating strangers with kindness and love. I offer those texts not as a moral anchor or imperative, but as a reminder that those who recorded the ancient Jewish experience valued the acceptance of newcomers.

When it comes to that issue, I’m grateful to have evidence that our forebears hit the correct moral mark. Frequently they did not. Had the Torah instead abhorred the stranger, I would advocate for immigrants just the same. Still, when modern values do correspond to the ancient teachings of



Rabbi Jeffrey Falick and children from CHJ Metro Detroit.

our heritage, I believe we can take some strength from that. After all, a connection to the long story of our people is one of the strongest elements of Jewish identity.

I hope that the completely this-worldly approach that I’ve outlined so far will answer, in part, questions of the Bible’s relevance to Humanistic Jews. However, I remain aware that widespread unfamiliarity with the text continues to pose a sizeable obstacle. It is, after all, a very large collection of texts, often ridiculously difficult to understand. And, if anything, modern secular scholarship has made it more so. Today it’s no longer enough to simply understand the Bible’s own internal claims about the Israelite story, we must also take on its multiple voices, editorial manipulations, and the ongoing archeological discoveries that – as often as not – cast entire segments of its narrative in a new light. Fortunately, there is today a cottage industry of introductions to the Bible, from online lectures to introductory texts.

Like many who grew up in a largely secular Jewish home, my own background in biblical texts was pretty sketchy when I

was first introduced (simultaneously) to the basic narrative and the critical approach at the Reform rabbinical seminary. There were enough Cliff’s Notes-type summaries for me to become familiar with the narrative, but after that, it was the critical approach that excited me the most, because once I had a better grasp of the stories, I wanted to know just why the stories were told! Take for example the story of the exodus from Egypt.

Most rational people can easily see that the biblical story is mostly fiction. What I wanted to know was why a people so clearly rooted in Canaan/Israel – most scholars accept that the Israelites were indigenous – would make up a story about conquering a land where they already lived! Is there a grain of truth to the story?

As I consulted the ever-evolving evidence produced by secular scholarship, I felt the earliest rays of my then-nascent Humanistic Judaism breaking through. Yet even as I gained more proficiency at discovering how the texts came together, my rabbinical seminary professors clamped down on my enthusiasm, admonishing me that it was not my role as a rabbi to teach their academic approach. That was the job

of professors. My task was to eke life lessons from the text, to teach (indoctrinate?) Jews about the “living Torah.”

Ultimately, Humanistic Judaism set me free to teach the texts as I see fit. Since joining the movement, I have developed classes and lectures about the evolution of God, the authors and sources of the Bible, and the real stories behind its stories. These have been popular at my own congregation and in the wider community. Before I conclude, I’ll share just two short examples of the kind material I cover, beginning with the tale of Noah’s famous ark.

Long before I ever learned about secular and academic perspectives on the Bible, back when I was a teen, it was the story of Noah’s Ark that bothered me the most. It wasn’t the narrative about God’s destruction of all life – though that’s troubling – it was the fact that I didn’t seem to fully understand it! Was I dense? Isn’t this a story that they (horrifyingly) tell to young children?

Though we tend to think of it as easily comprehensible to a child, the Torah’s account is actually overly complicated and internally contradictory. You can experience this for yourself by reading Genesis 6:5 – 9:17 and attempting to answer the following questions. How many pairs of each animal does Noah bring aboard the ark? Where did the water come from? How many days does the flood last? Why are there two endings to the story? While you’re contemplating these questions, you might also notice how needlessly repetitious the whole thing is. The flood starts twice, Noah’s family boards the ark twice, multiple birds are sent out to do the same job, and more. Why would any author write a story that way?

Biblical criticism supplied the answer. The account of Noah’s ark is not one text, but two versions of the same story written many hundreds of years apart. Rather than present them separately, the final editors chose to blend them into one another. They did this despite the fact that the writers of each version had very different ideas about

the deity and much else. Though I’ve taught this many times now, I never cease to revel in my students’ excitement when they discover the multiple voices in the text and see for themselves the evolution of ancient Israelite beliefs and society. Between the lines of this supposedly simple tale lie complex transformations of our people. Additionally, the story also provides a great introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis, a prominent model used by biblical scholars that proposes four principal sources – originating in



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different times and places – that contribute to the bulk of the Torah’s texts.

Another favorite of mine is the story of the Golden Calf found in Exodus 32. Tradition regards it as the Israelites’ (the Jews’) single greatest rebellion against God. And yet, those who look past the Torah to narratives of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (I Kings 12) know that none other than King Jeroboam, the first leader of the secessionist northern kingdom of Israel, built not one but two golden calves. He conveniently located them at two easily accessible worship spots within his new kingdom, doing so with the

idea that this would keep the people loyal to their new king.

Most Biblical critics believe that the Exodus story about the sin of the Golden Calf was invented by writers who were opposed to the secession of the northern kingdom. It was their way of shaming King Jeroboam, accusing him of re-committing what was supposedly the worst sin in his people’s history. This critique is supported by an understanding of the place of golden calves in ancient Near Eastern iconography. Archeological discoveries, for example, have revealed that in King Jeroboam’s time and earlier golden calves were all the rage everywhere. Yet outside of the fictional account in Exodus, they don’t represent a deity, but a deity’s throne. These discoveries strongly suggest that when King Jeroboam erected his golden calves it was a culturally normative thing to do and that he had no awareness of the Exodus tale, which did not yet exist. I take a great deal of pleasure revealing to students the truth about golden calves in Israelite history. The real story is not that some rebellious Jews died for worshipping an idol. The real story is that a rebellious king did a perfectly normal thing in the midst of his reign and that his opponents retroactively made a similar fictional instance of it into the Great Sin.

The stories behind these and so many more open a very wide door to biblical relevance for Humanistic Jews. Together they restore the Bible to our very human hands and sensibilities. Where the assumption of divine inspiration fails to capture our imagination, the reality of human creativity, revealed in so many contradictory and inconsistent biblical texts, reminds us that the Bible is, above all, the creation of our ancestors. Today we have the modern tools to understand this. I invite you to learn more. It is no less our inheritance simply because we reject its supernatural claims. In fact, it may be more so. 🙏

*References and other notes to accompany this article can be found at:
<https://bit.ly/HJ-Summer2022>*