

# Can the Old Testament be read as reliable history?

## Introduction

It depends upon which sources you read, but you may be forgiven for thinking that what we find within the pages of the Old Testament (OT) are at the best a form of myth, the telling of a 'spiritual' story which is only loosely based upon some memory of the events themselves - if, indeed, those events actually happened.

Indeed, since the days of Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), there has been no shortage of skeptical writers stepping up to pour cold water on the very idea of the historicity of the OT accounts. Wellhausen himself, in his *Prolegomena* (1882) taught that the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) were late, revisionist accounts of early Jewish history, written several centuries after the lifetime of Moses.

There have been responses of varying quality to these forms of skepticism. Some have compounded the problem by over-egging a kind of heavy, literalist view of the Old Testament - one which ignores the forms of literature which makes it up. Some have been driven to statements in defence of these ancient documents which go beyond what the text actually warrants - such an approach plays straight into the hands of those who set out to demonstrate that a conservative view of the Bible has little academic credibility.

There are, of course, credible answers - although we shouldn't encourage the idea that there are short-cuts available to us, which don't involve getting to know the text itself, and finding out how it is *supposed* to operate. The OT contains 'wisdom literature' (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), poetry and devotional material (Psalms, Song of Solomon), parallel historical narratives (1 & 2 Kings, Chronicles), legal and constitutional documents (Leviticus, Deuteronomy), prophetic writings that speak into (then) current contexts as well as looking into the future (Isaiah, Daniel, Micah). And then there are books where it is perhaps less clear what may be going on - Genesis *seems* to be some kind of historical account, but the two versions of creation don't match up on every detail, and seem to have somewhat different foci.

It is clear, therefore, that how we understand, use and apply the OT is important. We cannot simply sail straight in and expect Genesis 1 & 2 to have some kind of direct answer to Charles Darwin: the ancient writers had quite different objectives in mind when they penned their accounts. One possible answer is to look and see how, in the New Testament, Jesus handles such passages (when he does). After all, *if* he is the Son of God, you'd expect him to have some insight on the matter.

If we may advance a preliminary conclusion before advancing more detail, then perhaps it is this: before we rush into simplistic judgements on these things (which is, frankly, what the New Atheists are adept at), let's pause and consider what is going on behind the scenes.

## Are there Agendas?

Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* was probably the most influential such work of skepticism, but it didn't suddenly emerge from an ideological vacuum. Darwin's '*On the Origin of Species*' was published in 1859 and was a timely book in that it translated into an intellectually acceptable way the philosophy of naturalism<sup>1</sup>, which had been growing in influence within the Universities across Western Europe, ever since the Enlightenment. Naturalism, as a philosophy, had been around under various guises over the centuries, but had never quite managed to permeate into the mainstream: Darwin gave it its big break. Indeed, prior to his prominence, and even for some time

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<sup>1</sup> 'Naturalism' is the philosophical belief that everything arises from natural properties and causes, and supernatural or spiritual explanations are excluded or discounted. (Wikipedia)

afterwards, most of what scientists got up to was directly initiated by a Christian worldview. The belief that the universe functioned along the lines of laid-down, rational rules and laws required a designer and lawgiver - and therefore the universe was worth investigating, so science was 'do-able'.

Wellhausen's theories<sup>2</sup> are now substantially discredited but they held sway for the better part of a century and they were viscerally anti-supernatural (or, rather, *naturalist*) in their basis. The reason why those first five OT books had to be late-authored myth was because they dealt with a supernatural God who created, intervened, judged sin, rewarded obedience and predicted the future. These things are anathema to naturalism, and the *Prolegemona* provided a plausible basis for relegating these documents to a category of myth of fiction.

It did more than that. The Pentateuch tells the story of the establishment of Israel as a nation-state. Wellhausen is writing, in Germany, at a time of mounting anti-semitism. It is no coincidence that his theories had the effect of denying the Jewish people their own nationhood, and it is highly likely that Hitler and his henchmen later on drew heavily upon this narrative, to form the basis for their own extreme denial of Jewish identity. There are other forces in the modern world which continue to practice this kind of approach.

### **Some general considerations**

The purpose of this (brief) paper is not to supply all the answers, but rather some kind of framework for consideration which may help you get to grips with the Old Testament. It is, however, entirely appropriate to outline some general thoughts which should assist you.

Firstly, it needs to be admitted that if you wish to find controversy about the OT narratives, you won't need to look very far. Most secular archeologists wouldn't exactly throw their weight behind the historicity of the Exodus account of the ten plagues in Egypt, and the escape of the Jewish people under the leadership of Moses. We'll look a little later at this topic, as something of a case-study, but my own analysis indicates that the Academy's unfriendliness to the biblical account has as much to do with the presuppositional framework of naturalism as anything else. After all, if the world must be described in such a way as to exclude the divine, then a story which assumes throughout the direct intervention of God cannot have any place in such a world. You'll find similar controversies over Noah's Flood, the Canaanite Conquests and - of course - the whole, meaty topic of origins and the existence of a 'real' Adam and Eve.

Secondly, it should be clearly understood that Wellhausen's theories have largely been invalidated. We know of the names of Mesopotamian kings, and places first and foremost through the words of the Bible. Later on, archeologists have dug up artefacts which tell us about these personages and places, recorded for us on steles or tablets - but the Bible got there first. And, where the Bible records cultural details for us, it is remarkably accurate: the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) echo in some detail the kind of structure we have later on discovered in Ugaritic treaties. It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway - this kind of authenticity requires an *early* dating for the documents concerned, close to the culture and customs that are being described. Even the Bible's use of ancient names finds its reflections in archeological findings, allowing us to place these ancient documents within quite a tight chronology, with a high degree of reliability. It is worth being unequivocal about this issue: the ancient biblical accounts present us with an entirely accurate picture of (a) covenants and social customs, (b) law codes, including slave prices, (c) personal names and (d) place names.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that (of course) even though the OT books may be reliably 'grounded' by way of their accurate historical and cultural content, this does not prove what they have to say is *true*. It merely tells us that, where the relevant authors have covered matters of historical detail, they were pretty accurate. The mere getting right of the historical data doesn't force the incurably

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<sup>2</sup> Generally subsumed under the title of the 'Documentary Hypothesis'.

skeptical person to accept the main thrust of the message: God treats us with more respect than that. He expects us to exercise our rationality and think these matters through - clearly, if the author has taken trouble to get his facts right, and when a given document was clearly written close to the events it describes, then logic would indicate that it is worth taking seriously, and not simply dismiss it all as 'myth'.

Fourthly, it is worth reflecting upon what the Bible, and especially the OT, tells us about the character of God. It does not present a kind of 'deist' view of the universe, where God winds up the clock, chucks it away and from thereon is disinterested in what he has created, preferring instead to let the universe tick away the remaining minutes of eternity through the clockwork that he created. No, the Bible shows us a God who creates us as an act of love, and then continues to sustain us as an act of love. This is a God who, though separate from creation (this is no pantheist view of things), none the less chooses to be immanent - and ultimately, in the New Testament (NT) we see that immanence take full form in the person of Christ. This being the case, the OT narrative consistently shows us a God who interacts with us, walks with us, shows concern for us, and intervenes where necessary for us. Incontrovertibly, such a view would be unacceptable to the naturalist, who would be prepared to tolerate the idea of God *only* if he were entirely painted out of the picture of human experience.

Fifthly, although this is by no means the 'complete answer' to all the perceived problems that arise out of the OT histories, it is worth just thinking about how NT writers and personages dealt with such matters. New Atheists such as Christopher Hitchens seem to present these people as ignorant country bumpkins, born into a primitive culture, and clearly incapable of knowing their right hands from their left. If there were any truth to that kind of contention then it is all the more remarkable that they gave rise to a culture which, unlike the paganism of 1st century Greco-Roman culture, gave full equality to women, was able to care for widows and orphans, and ultimately gave rise to hospitals and sanatoriums. Of course, the very portrayal is laughable - in Acts 17, Paul, in his address before the Areopagus, demonstrates an encyclopedic familiarity with the Greek philosophers and poets. Anybody who has attempted to read Plato will know the implications of such insight. We know that Peter was bilingual, and Jesus himself demonstrates an acuity and capacity for handling logic and Scripture which left his audience stunned. Therefore, when such individuals treat with OT narratives as if they are serious history (Adam, Eve, Noah, Moses, Elijah etc), then at the very least we should sit up and take notice. It is, frankly, a copout to dismiss them as "men of their times": the fact is, that they understood their own times rather better than we do, and they had a forensic familiarity with their own texts which most modern authorities lack.

### **A Casestudy: Exercised over Exodus?**

I have indicated already that self-respecting academics are unlikely to nail their colours to the mast of the historical accuracy of the Exodus narrative. To a very great degree, this does reflect the kind of culture which has become endemic within the academy.

Even Jewish academics, such as Jacob Finkelstein, whom you might assume would be biased towards an interpretation of the data which supports the basis for the nation-state of Israel, come out in favour of a fictional or mythological view of Exodus. Academics which take a more conservative view of the data (eg. James K. Hoffmeier, in 'Israel in Egypt') tend to suffer snide and derogatory comments in the book reviews on Amazon, and I would imagine that their stance does not win them many plaudits within a professional context.

My own reading of the literature suggests that whilst hardline secularists tend to dismiss the biblical narrative out of hand, the real issue for serious academics is less to do with the evidence, or the absence thereof, but rather the dating of it. This means, at the very least, that the issue has less to do with a kind of binary decision (true or not true), and is rather more of a movable feast, dependent upon how strongly a protagonist is driven by ideology, especially by the presuppositions of naturalism. The debate about dating (1400 BC or 1550BC?) remains an open one, and it would

demonstrate an insupportable degree of confidence to try and solve it here. It seems more constructive to itemise the kinds of evidence that we do have which are consistent with the biblical account, and leave the reader to draw their own conclusions. To assist you in this, I have categorised three kinds of circumstantial evidence that, together, support the biblical narrative's contention that (a) Israelites lived in Egypt prior to the Exodus, (b) that a series of events occurred which led to their expulsion and (c) that they were involved in some sort of colonisation of Canaan, involving military activity:

#### (A) Evidence that Israelites inhabited Egypt

- There is evidence of Jewish inhabitation in the Nile delta region, consistent with a 1600-1446 BC time horizon;
- Egyptian wall paintings show Semites entering Egypt c. 1870 BC;
- Findings at Tell el-Dab'a confirm that Semites were living in Egypt prior to the Exodus - including scarabs engraved with semitic names and residential structures resembling those from the Levant;
- 20% of all pottery findings are of Middle Bronze-Age period, emanating from the Levant;
- Bones of Canaanitish sheep breeds dating back to this period in the Nile Delta region;
- The Leningrad Papyrus talks about immigrants being enslaved for building projects (the Egyptians did not distinguish between ethnic groups - referred to all of them as 'asiatics');
- 18th Dynasty wall-paintings show Semites involved in various types of slave-labour, including the making of mud bricks *without straw*;
- In the Speos Artemidos Inscription, Queen Hapshepsut refers to asiatics in the region of Avaris and specifically confirms that they did not worship the sun-god, Ra. Furthermore, there are references to sheep-herders and 'vagrants' in the area, matching the Exodus narrative;
- The Brooklyn Papyrus lists household slaves in Thebes (1700-1620 BC): 37 of the 95 are characteristically semitic names (Eve, Menahem, Jacob, Isaac, David etc).

#### (B) Evidence of the Plagues

- The 'Admonitions of Ipuwer' (Leiden Papyrus, 13th C BC) describes quite clear parallels to the Exodus account of the ten plagues;
- There is indirect but persuasive evidence of Egyptian influence on Israel's culture, post-Exodus - eg. the Golden Calf, the design of the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, early forms of written Hebrew and names also reflect Egyptian influence;
- There are evidences that Amenhotep II (1446 BC) was the Pharaoh that Exodus describes:
  - (a) timing of his succession following Thutmose III;
  - (b) declining military power (see what happened to Thutmose's armies in Exodus 14);
  - (c) slave conquests under Amenhotep went into overdrive (there's an army to replenish);
  - (d) Amenhotep had a particular dislike of Semites - and commissioned inscriptions describing them as "worthless";
  - (e) Queen Hapshepsut's monuments were all defaced by Amenhotep - she was responsible for saving and raising Moses in the biblical narrative (Exodus 2);
  - (f) Amenhotep is referred to as the 'Arrogant' - always boasting, as if he had to make up for something (a crippling defeat at the Red Sea?);

(g) Amenhotep's son (Thutmose IV) was not the rightful firstborn son (what happened to him? Exodus 12);

(h) Manetho, the Egyptian priest-historian, reports an exodus of people going to Judea. Josephus also reports this.

### (C) Evidence for Conquest of Canaan

- The account is recorded for us in Numbers 33;
- Approximate dating for it is 1406BC;
- The setting: Canaan is divided into city-states which are accurately represented in the Bible;
- "Israel" is mentioned in Canaanitish archeological finds, as are the names of Jewish tribes and groups;
- 'Amarna Tablets' (1365-1335 BC) include the writings of Canaanite vassals, complaining about how they are being attacked by the 'Habiru' (Hebrews). 106 of these documents are letters addressed to Amenhotep's administration, requesting assistance;
- The Amarna Tablets refer to the same 17 cities which the book of Joshua also describes;
- Jericho is the controversial one. Garstang (1930s) believed that the archeology was supportive of Joshua's account, and he had no Christian axe to grind. Later, Kathleen Kenyon (1958) disagreed with Garstang's conclusions, but 30 years later Bryant Wood's analysis demonstrated major problems with Kenyon's research;
- The house of Rahab (Joshua 2:12-15) has found support through German excavations;
- Large pots of uneaten grain discovered in the destruction layer at Jericho - Joshua 6:17-19;
- The archeology of Hazor and Shechem is consistent with the biblical accounts, and the dating is correct.

### (D) So where's the problem?

According to the Bible, the Jewish people spent 40 years wandering in the desert, before entering Canaan. Skeptics point out that there is no evidence of this, and they are quite justified in adopting that position. However, we already know that the unstable sandy environment has a capacity to 'eat' evidence, leaving no trace behind - this is likely to be particularly so when considering a nomadic culture which doesn't stay very long in any one place. More interestingly, the narrative is helpfully rich in place names, and when plotted on the map, it shows that the writers were intimately familiar with the main caravan routes across this area.

The amount of evidence relating to the Nile Delta phase is clearly not as strong as some would like (although it is circumstantially robust), but this tends to ignore the conditions there. The main writing medium at the time is papyrus, and the Nile Delta was a relatively damp region where material rots down quickly. The conditions for preservation are minimal, even if the Egyptians were inclined to keep records of a people and events which humiliated them. The evidence from Queen Hapshepsut is that the tendency was to obliterate the records of matters which were inconvenient to them.

I think there is a bigger, more fundamental problem here. The presuppositions of naturalism deny that the world is a place where there can ever be evidence of an intervening, supernatural God. It is not merely that such a God is inconvenient to the thesis, rather he must be denied any place in the narrative. The secularising influence on the academy is such that *however* we interpret the data, the one thing it may not be permitted to do is demonstrate the activity of such a God. Clearly, with a book such as the Bible, which is essentially a prolonged account of God's dealings with his people, then we have a problem which is not easily dealt with.

Couple that with a culture which has developed within the academy where leading academics can so easily lose their tenure if they step outside of the secularist paradigm<sup>3</sup>, and it is not difficult to understand why we may not more often encounter perspectives which are more friendly to the biblical narrative.

## **Finally**

Although these notes have included an excursion on the subject of Exodus, because the matter is emblematic of a wider issue in relation to our interpretation of the biblical accounts, I have sought to keep this paper relatively broad-brush in its approach.

There are, however, plenty of similar issues which the thoughtful reader may wish to work their way through, as I indicated on page 2. Clearly, it is beyond the reach of this kind of paper to engage with them all, and I freely admit that some of the events described in the Bible (eg. Noah's flood and ark) are far from straightforward to resolve, although there are ways in which we may establish sufficient historical credibility in order to move on.

It is my view that, difficulties and nuances aside, when the Bible speaks about historical matters (personages, places and events), it is reliable and insightful and demonstrates a consistently unwavering regard for detail that we ignore to our cost.

## **Further Reading**

"Lost Treasures of the Bible" by Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish (Wm. B. Eerdmans).

"The Old Testament Documents - Are They Reliable & Relevant?" by Walter C. Kaiser Jr (IVP Academic)

"The Archaeology of the Bible" by James K. Hoffmeier (Lion Hudson).

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<sup>3</sup> There have been a number of examples of this in recent years, both in the US and UK. I, personally, know of leading academics who are Christians, who have been warned to keep their views to themselves, lest they find themselves without tenure. Matters such as those discussed in this paper cannot now be debated in an open environment, free of the threat to reputation or livelihood.