

# On the Historicity of the Biblical Account

*By: Danios*

Dr. William G. Dever, a Professor of Near Eastern Archeology and Anthropology at the University of Arkansas, writes:

Until modern literary-critical biblical scholarship began to emerge in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament was regarded as Scripture, as Holy Writ. Its stories were taken at face value and were read more or less literally by Jews, by Christians, and by the public at large. [1]

Stories of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan were believed to be literally true. Even scholars took the Biblical account as more or less accurate. Archaeologists began to dig in modern day Israel, looking for evidence to support the Exodus and Conquest. Perhaps somewhat ironically, many of these digs were funded or supported by Jewish or Christian groups seeking to validate the Bible through archeology. Prof. Dever says:

Bible in hand, archaeologists excavated sites like Jericho and confidently announced to the waiting world that they had brought to light the very walls that Joshua brought tumbling down. As the title of a German journalist's best-selling book put it, "The Bible Was Right After All" (*Und die Bibel hat doch Recht*). Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even more enthusiasm and optimism about "biblical archeology's" potential for proving the truth of the Bible were common. As one biblical Old Testament scholar put it in the 1930s:

"Not a ruined site has been opened up that has given any comfort to unbelieving critics or evolutionists. Every find of archaeologists in Bible lands has gone to confirm Scripture and confound its enemies...Not since Christ ascended back to heaven have there been so many scientific proofs that God's word is truth." [2]

Soon, however, the field many thought would scientifically prove the Bible would be the one that would most dramatically call to question its contents:

As archaeological evidence mounted, however, in the heyday of "biblical archeology" between the 1930s and the 1950s, the question of Israelite origins grew more intractable. [3]

Quite the opposite of what was expected by believers occurred: the evidence simply did not support the Biblical story of Exodus and Conquest. Today, the most widely accepted view amongst expert scholarship is that the story of Exodus and Conquest as narrated in the Bible are nothing more than

myth. Concludes Dr. Dever:

The Exodus as it now stands in the Bible cannot be corroborated as factual history...The story, however, dramatic, however central to the self-identification of later Biblical Israel—or even our own identity in the West—is best regarded as a myth. [4]

Indeed, the existence of Moses or Joshua is unverifiable from a scientific angle:

Did Moses Exist?

Some scholars question the existence of a historical Moses, while others raise concerns about the accuracy of the stories told about his life. John van Seters, for example, writes, "The quest for the historical Moses is a futile exercise. He now only belongs to legend" (quoted in Dewey M. Beegle, "Moses," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol.4 [New York:DoubleDay, 1992]). In other words, if a historical figure Moses existed, no one could know anything about him other than what the biblical text reveals. [5]

Similar is the case with Joshua and many—if not all—the Judeo-Christian prophets.\*

It may be tempting, therefore, for our opponents to argue that we can't possibly compare the stories of Moses or Joshua to those of Muhammad, since the former are unverifiable. My earlier response applies here:

It could be argued that the life and wars of Moses are of questionable historicity, and that secular scholarship would doubt the accuracy of Jewish scriptural sources. Yet, this argument is nullified by the fact that the life and wars of Muhammad are similarly subject to questionable historicity. The primary sources of Muhammad's life and wars come almost exclusively from the Islamic scriptural sources and tradition, namely "(1) casual allusions in the Qur'an and (2) oral traditions". More neutral non-Muslim sources from the seventh century are scant, and at most confirm the existence of Muhammad and very basic data. Writes Professor Solomon Alexander Nigosian on p.6 of [\*Islam: Its History, Teaching, and Practices\*](#):

The attempt to separate the historical from the unhistorical elements in the available sources has yielded few, if any, positive results regarding the figure of Muhammad or the role he played in Islam. The predicament faced by modern scholars is perhaps best stated by Harald Motzki:

At present, the study of Muhammad, the founder of the Muslim community, is obviously caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, it is not possible to write a

historical biography of the Prophet without being accused of using the sources uncritically, while on the other hand, when using the sources critically, it is simply not possible to write such a biography.

In order to construct narratives of Muhammad's wars, one must rely on the Islamic scriptural sources and tradition (the same ones which Islamophobes use to criticize Islam). It seems only reasonable and fair then to compare Muhammad with the Moses derived from the Jewish scriptural sources and tradition. And in this light, Moses does not stack up well against Muhammad.

We are forced then to compare the Biblical Moses and Joshua to the Muhammad derived from Islamic sources. This is the only reasonable comparison.

Another protestation from our opponents is that the modern day Jews and Christians have "tossed the Bible aside", unlike the Muslims who cling to their scripture. Therefore, the argument goes, invoking the Bible is hardly relevant, since "most Jews and Christians no longer give credence to it."

This argument is not grounded in fact, however. A poll by [Rasmussen Reports](#) found that a majority of all Americans (63%) believe the Bible is literally true and the Word of God, with less than a quarter (24%) disagreeing with this belief. This is quite amazing when one considers that [about 20% of Americans are neither Jewish or Christian!](#) The percentage of those who believe in the literal meaning of the Bible jumps to 70% for Protestants, and becomes overwhelming (89%) for Evangelical Christians in specific. Meanwhile, 77% of Republicans believe in the literal truth of the Bible.

A [Pew Research poll](#) bore out similar results, with 78% of Americans believing that the Bible is either the actual or [inspired](#) Word of God. This view is held by 88% of Protestants, 82% of Catholics, and 91% of other Christian groups. Contrary to the emerging scholarly consensus that the Biblical stories such as Exodus and Conquest are "best regarded as a myth", only a minority of the public at large (19% of Americans, 11% of Protestants, 16% of Catholics, and 6% of other Christian groups) believe that the Bible is just "ancient fables, history, and legends." Quite the contrary to the argument made by our opponents, most of the adherents of Christianity and Orthodox Judaism very much believe in the accuracy of their scriptural texts!

In any case, it would seem like a "religious suicide attack" for Jewish or Christian Islamophobes to argue that their own scriptural sources are completely bogus! Indeed, the Exodus and Conquest are the very *foundation* of Judaism. As Prof. Dever writes:

One of the principal concerns of laypeople is the question of the “Exodus and Conquest.” Anyone even remotely acquainted with Jewish and Christian traditions instinctively grasps that these are fundamental issues as they have to do with the origins, as well as the distinctive nature, of the people of the Bible. People rightly ask, “If the story of the Exodus from Egypt is all a myth, then what can we believe?”

In Israel, the suddenly-fashionable denial of the biblical stories of the Exodus and Conquest takes on a special urgency for many because it calls to question early Zionism's fundamental rationale for Jewish claims to the land. [6]

The need to affirm the Biblical origins of the Israelite nation has been seen by many Israelis as fundamental to the assertion of their very identity and the right to the land. To then suddenly flip the argument in a desire to counter our argument seems rather inconsistent. Our opponents—extremist Zionist Jews and fundamentalist Messianic Christians—are the least likely to question the Biblical account, for reasons that seem patently obvious. Indeed, admitting that their scriptural sources are untrustworthy would be a case of trying to win the battle by losing the war.

Certainly, most Christians and Orthodox Jews believe in the accuracy of the Bible. Stated one way, the memory of the Jewish prophet Joshua is far bloodier, violent, and warlike than that of the Prophet Muhammad. In any case, what is clearly undeniable—as we see and will continue to see in this Series—is that the Bible is far bloodier, violent, and warlike than the Quran. Would our opponents at least concede this painfully obvious point? This alone would be the end of the debate.

\*Naturally, to the believer the lack of scientific proof does not negate faith, which is by definition belief in the unseen. As the Bible says: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” (John 20:29)

[1] William G. Dever. Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006

[2] Ibid., p.4

[3] Ibid., p.5

[4] Ibid., p.232

[5] Gravett, Sandra. An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: A Thematic Approach. London, U.K.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008

[6] Dever, p.3