

“It Ain’t Necessarily So”
History and Biblical Narrative
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The Text or title for my sermon today is 4 words: “It ain’t necessarily so.” Many of you will recall this song from George and Ira Gershwin’s wonderful opera, “Porgy and Bess”, sung by a sceptical drug dealer named “Sportin’ Life”: “It ain’t necessarily so, It ain’t necessarily so, De things that yo’ liable to read in de Bible, It ain’t necessarily so.”

During the Christmas week, Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury was reported in the news as generating controversy by stating in a live radio interview [Dec 19, BBC 5] that the story of the Nativity as recounted in the Gospels and preserved in the popular collective memory of Christian communities had serious historical problems. He mentioned the mid-winter date (December 25), and the visit of the Three Kings to the infant Jesus in the manger as having no biblical basis, and therefore being in the category of “legend” rather than history.

In this regard, Dr Williams was quite right on historical grounds. The fact is that many aspects of the commonly accepted Nativity narrative underlying the holiday of Christmas are rejected by Christian scholars who approach the material historically. No date or season for the birth of Jesus is given anywhere in the New Testament. Gentile kings celebrated their birth days, not Jews. Indeed, no birth date was associated with Jewish messianic expectation until after the destruction of the Temple, and then it was associated with that very date—Tisha b’Av—which of course always comes in the summer. It was not until the early 4th century that the birth date of Jesus began to be celebrated, over the objections of some of the Church Fathers. At that time, all the Christian authorities agreed that there was no authentic tradition about the date of birth, and the 25th of December was chosen pretty much arbitrarily, perhaps as competition to the pagan festivals at the winter solstice.

As for the visit of three Kings from different parts of the world, painted by some of the greatest artists of European tradition: the Gospel of Luke speaks of the visit of three humble shepherds; the Gospel of Matthew of an unspecified number of Magi, wise men, or astrologers, from the East. The three kings is another example of a popular conception without basis in Scripture – like the belief that the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was an apple, or that our ancestors built the Egyptian pyramids.

But let’s take it a step further beyond where Dr Williams went, critical Christian scholarship has also questioned the historicity of Bethlehem as the city of birth. This is identified as his birthplace in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (the other two Gospels have no Nativity narrative at all). Luke explains that while Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth, they returned to Joseph’s ancestral home in Bethlehem in order to register for a census ordered by the Emperor Augustus. But specialists in Roman history are unable to connect this with any census known at the time when Jesus was born. Furthermore, the narratives about his career show no knowledge of a birth in Bethlehem – he is always identified as “Jesus of Nazareth.”

A passage in the Gospel of John (7:41-43, 52) indicates that his messianic claims were challenged by some who said, “Surely the Messiah is not to come from Galilee! Does not Scripture say that the Messiah is to be of the family of David, from David’s village of Bethlehem? . . . Study the Scripture and you will find that prophets do not come from the Galilee.” Here they were undoubtedly referring to Micah 5:1: “And you, O Bethlehem . . . From you one shall come forth to rule Israel for Me.” Now we would expect the natural response to this to have been, “Idiot” don’t you know he *was* born in Bethlehem?!” But no such response is given. The choice of Bethlehem may well have been invented in order to strengthen the claim that Jesus was the authentic Messiah.

Thus – “It ain’t necessarily so” with all the details of the Christmas story. And this raises the larger question: what happens to religious belief when foundational stories are questioned by the best analytic tools of modern scholarship. What if the consensus of critical scholarship were that Jesus was born in Nazareth, during the summer, and that there is no record or of any specially bright star in the sky, or any attention at all given to this particular birth. Certainly the Christmas holiday would take something of a beating. But would Christian faith itself be undermined? Is it strengthened by recent discovery of an apparently authentic inscription in Aramaic: Jacob bar Joseph brother of Jesus?

Before suggesting an answer to that question, however, let’s apply it to our own situation. Our Torah parashah reaches a climax in its description of the last day and night of Egyptian enslavement before the Exodus. This includes the Tenth Plague: the killing of the first-born of every living creature in Egypt, except for the Israelites. First, Moses reports to Pharaoh that this will happen, then the Biblical narrative tells us that it did: “In the middle of the night, the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle. And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians—because there was a loud cry in Egypt; *ki ein bayit asher ein sham met*, for there was no house where there was not someone dead” (12: 29–30).

That is what the Torah says. Did it really happen like that? Many of the earlier plagues can be explained naturalistically, and this is indeed what some of our more rationalistically oriented commentators have done. But here there is no escape from a supernatural interpretation. First, God himself is said to be the perpetrator, directly, without intermediate causes. And second, I know of no explanation that could account for a plague striking dead one person—the first-born—in each and every household. This is the kind of supernatural intervention and contravention of the laws of nature that requires a suspension of disbelief to accept.

But even if it were possible for God to work through natural phenomena, there are abundant and serious problems of an ethical nature: Pharaoh is punished, although it says that God hardened his heart in order to be able to demonstrate God’s marvels in Egypt (11:9). Why not just him? Why every household? Why the captive in prison?¹ Why the cattle? And why the children?

¹ (Rashi: rejoiced at misfortune of Israel, might have believed their gods were punishing Egypt)

They were apparently killed in order to punish parents, to put greater pressure on Pharaoh. It seems to be the culmination of a policy that we may recognize from more recent times: you make the life of the civilian population so miserable, so intolerable, that they will rise up to force the government—in this case, the Pharaoh—to do whatever is necessary to make the nightmare stop. Did it actually happen like this? I have serious doubts about the historicity of this narrative. “It ain’t necessarily so” – at least I certainly hope not. For a God who can act this way is not the kind of God that most of us want to worship.

Let’s get beyond the 10th Plague and the observance of the 1st seder, which took place not in freedom but in Egypt either during or immediately before the final plague. What about the historicity of the Exodus itself. Several years ago, David Wolpe, rabbi of a large conservative congregation in California, gave a Pesach sermon in which he said that there is no archaeological evidence that the Exodus ever took place. There is no reference anywhere in the abundant extant Egyptian literature to a massive enslavement of Hebrew immigrants, or to an catastrophic disaster for the Egyptian army led by Pharaoh; no pottery evidence of a large Israelite community passing through the Sinai wilderness; no evidence of a massive influx of Israelites into Canaan at the time associated with the Exodus and wilderness period. Needless to say, he generated a lot of controversy, with many negative responses—just like the remarks of Dr Williams.

I am not a biblical scholar, but for what its worth, here is my understanding of the historicity of the Exodus narratives for this week and next, and the history of the conquest of the Land of Canaan. First: the entire episode of plagues and Exodus that is so central to our self-understanding as a people was not at all a major event from the perspective of Egyptian history. In this respect it is analogous to the Nativity and the Crucifixion of Jesus: absolutely fundamental for Christian self-understanding, but minor, even trivial, events that went unrecorded by contemporary Roman historians and Jewish historians.

The Exodus account itself should be read with the translation “Sea of Reeds” (Yam Suf), rather than “Red Sea,” and the spectacular parting of the waters from Cecil B. DeMille’s *Ten Commandments* should be blotted out of our minds. Something occurred that was perceived by the Israelites as a miracle—as many of us perceived the victory of the Six Day War—but it was not a catastrophe in Egyptian history, and it almost certainly did not involve the Pharaoh. Perhaps a border garrison and its commander. The numbers given in our parasha—600,000 Israelite men not counting the children (12:37)—are wildly exaggerated; there is no way that a group like this could have moved cohesively through the Sinai desert, with or without a pillar of fire or a pillar of cloud.²

A much smaller group of Israelites entered the Land of Canaan with a collective memory of an experience in Egypt. They were successful in some military

² During the period when David Ben Gurion was PM of Israel, he used to host Bible study groups in his home on Shabbat afternoons. One scholar made a proposition that the word, *elef*, translated “thousand” in this verse, can have the meaning of family, or clan - 600 clans, rather than 600,000 men. That certainly makes it seem more plausible. When this was picked up in the Israeli media, a vote of no-confidence in BG’s government was proposed, and the government almost fell as a result.

campaigns, but not in conquering the entire land as suggested by the Book of Joshua. For generations they lived alongside the native Canaanite peoples, some of whom attached themselves to the Israelites, and took over in their own collective memories an Egyptian experience in which their own ancestors had never shared. In this respect, it is like so many of the immigrants to the United States who think of the First Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims as part of *their* history, though their ancestors were actually in a totally different place. This is a critical reading that I believe poses no real problems for our traditional Jewish self-understanding or observance.

Some Israeli and Scandinavian historians defend an even greater degree of historical scepticism. They maintain that there is no historical basis for any of the biblical accounts of Egyptian enslavement; the Israelites were never in Egypt and there was never an Exodus. Subsequent narratives about Joshua, Judges, even David and Solomon must be read purely as literature, not as evidence of history. It is only with the first confirmation in external sources of Biblical kings or events that we can accept the biblical narrative as historically true. Does such a view invalidate our observance of Pesach, as questioning the Nativity narratives raises potential problems for Christmas?

We are not fundamentalists, taking every statement in Scripture as absolute God-given truth. We must not stow our minds and our consciences as we hang up our coats when we enter the synagogue and listen to the Torah being read. Like Jews in the past, we have the right to register our suspicions that something may never have occurred as it is presented in a biblical narrative, and even to express our abhorrence of the actions attributed by some biblical authors to God, such as the killing of the first-born. All the things we're liable to read in the Bible - "It ain't necessarily so."

But this story, with all its problems, is *our* story. If I were a Christian, I would be open to the underlying message of the Christmas story—that God humbled himself to become a human being as an act of solidarity and love from every human being—without being bothered by the details of the narrative. As Jews, we can accept the underlying message of the Exodus account—

- that enslavement of other human beings leads eventually to one's own destruction,
- that liberation from bondage is the paradigmatic act of the divine force at work in history,
- that the collective memory of our ancestors having been slaves must impel us with empathy for the oppressed in every age—

we can and should accept this message even if the details of the narrative are unconvincing or troubling. It is these details that "ain't necessarily so"; the underlying truth of our story about enslavement, punish, and freedom retains its power to motivate and inspire in every age.