

“Who is Moses?” v. “Who was Moses?”
An Example of Mnemohistory: The Study of Cultural Memory¹
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I care not whether this man Moses really existed; whether his life and his activity really corresponded to our traditional account of him; whether he was really the savior of Israel and gave his people the Law in the form in which it is preserved among us; and so forth. I have one short and simple answer for all these conundrums. This Moses, I say, this man of old time, whose existence and character you are trying to elucidate, matters to nobody but scholars like you. We have another Moses of our own, whose image has been enshrined in the hearts of the Jewish people for generations, and whose influence on our national life has never ceased from ancient times till the present day. The existence of this Moses, as a historical fact, depends in no way on your [historical] investigations. For even if you succeeded in demonstrating he was not such a man as we supposed, you would not thereby detract one jot from the historical reality of the ideal Moses – the Moses who has been our leader not only for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai, but for thousands of years in all the wildernesses in which we have wandered since the Exodus....

And so when I read the Haggadah on the eve of Passover, and the spirit of Moses the son of Amram, that supremest of heroes, who stands like a pillar of light on the threshold of our history, hovers before me and lifts me out of this netherworld, I am quite oblivious of all the doubts and questions propounded by [the historical] critics.

¹ “Mnemohistory looks not at reconstructing the facts of what actually transpired, but seeks to recreate a record of how the original event – or person – is remembered by posterity.” Carl S. Ehrlich, *“The Exodus Story as Jewish Mnemohistory,”* TheTorah.com.



(Excerpts from: Ahad Ha-'Am, "Moses," in Leon Simon (trans. & ed.), *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha-'Am* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962; reprint of Jewish Publication Society, 1912, 1939) pp. 308-309.)

Mnemohistory: Torah as Sacred Lore

Many may feel a pang of fear when sacred stories of the past are referred to as lore—when mnemohistory is understood as something different than factual history. However, the most powerful force in most societies is not history. Societies are driven by their lore—their legends and their stories. Historically speaking, Columbus was not the first to realize that the world was round, but his trip to the New World has become one of the key symbols of the triumph of science and innovation over the Dark Ages' dogmatic rule of stagnant scholasticism.

The same is true for biblical stories and characters. The stories of the Torah reflect the ways the prophets of old refracted their encounters with divine wisdom through the prism of mnemohistorical narrative. Adam is the story about why humans are here, and Noah is the story about the precariousness of our position and the existential need to be good people in order for our existence to have meaning. The stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are about who we (Israel/Jews) are as a people and how we found God/God found us; the Exodus and Conquest tell us about Israel's mission as a nation and our covenantal relationship with God.

The prophets of old, accessing the divine flow, answered existential questions in stories with symbolic meaning. These stories are full of timeless messages and explain to us who we are even though they may not answer the questions with complete historical or scientific accuracy.

In contrast to the religious message of the Torah about the importance of humanity and the people of Israel's divine mission, secular knowledge tells us that humans are here due to the accidents of evolution, our position in this world is precarious due to our lack of control over the world (disease, comets, etc.), that Israel began as a hodgepodge of loosely confederated tribes of a similar ethnic background that joined together in common cause against the Canaanite city-states, perhaps together with a group of escaped Egyptian slaves, under the banner of Yhwh, whom they believed to be their one true God.

Which account is true? I say both accounts are true, but in different senses.²

² Zev Farber, *Avraham Avinu Is My Father*, Part V: "Mnemohistory: Torah as Sacred Lore," TheTorah.com, 2013.