

# Did Biblical Events Really Happen?

## Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Va'era*, we learn about some of the plagues that befell Egypt for not allowing the enslaved Israelites to go free: The Nile waters turns to blood, the country is invaded by frogs and locusts, and so forth. [Ex. 7:14-25, 8:16-19, 9:8-12, 10:1-20]

What do we make of all the fantastic and miraculous events recorded in the Bible -- the Creation, the plagues, the Exodus, the manna, and so many others?

## Were miracles natural phenomena?

Many thinkers have tried very hard to explain them as natural phenomena. Take, for example, Immanuel Velikovsky. He was a Russian-born American psychiatrist, Jewish and Zionist. In middle age, he became interested in whether biblical events, such as the Exodus from Egypt, were due to natural phenomena rather than divine intervention. He wondered whether the unusual motions of planets, comets, stars, etc., caused these biblical events.

- He concluded that Venus was a comet ejected from Jupiter. It had several close encounters with the Earth, and one of them caused the sun to stand still, as reported in the Book of Joshua. [Joshua 10:12-13].

- In another encounter, its tail sprayed a red pigment on the Nile, causing the plague of blood, and insects that caused the plagues of lice, boils and locusts.

His theories were very well-received by the general public. He wrote such huge best-sellers as *Worlds in Collision*, in 1950, *Ages in Chaos*, in 1952, *Earth in Upheaval*, in 1955, etc. All of them were savaged by all mainline scientists.

Let's not discuss his theories here. His is only one of many attempts to rationalize the Torah. Rather, let us ask: Does it matter whether biblical stories are historically accurate? If aliens from outer space had filmed these events and gave us the video evidence, and it proved the Torah descriptions wrong, would it affect Judaism? Would it affect *you*?

## **Teachings extracted from biblical events**

Well, for historians and scientists, it does matter whether the stories are correct or not. But for Judaism and Jewish teachings, it does not matter. The question Jews should ask is: Even if the stories are just parables, what teachings can we extract from them? That's what really counts. Here are some examples of this line of thinking from the Talmud:

### **-Why did God start humanity by creating only ONE person?**

- So that unbelievers would not be able to say: There are many authorities in Heaven, and each one created a different person.
- So that no one should be able to tell his neighbor, "My ancestors were better than your ancestors".
- So the wicked could not say: "We are children of the wicked originals, so we cannot change our ways."
- So the feeling of fraternity among people will limit crime.
- So people would know that God is One: Even though God created people in His image, every person can still be different from every other person: Unity in diversity.
- So that people would know that he who destroys one life is as if he had destroyed an entire world, and he who saves one life is as if he had saved an entire world. [Sanhedrin 37a, 38a]

### **-Why did God create man on the last day?**

- So that he can be told, when pride fills his heart, "God created the mosquito before you."
- So that no one could claim that man, i.e. Adam, was God's partner in Creation.
- So that humanity would begin its adventure with the observance of a mitzvah: Shabbat.
- So that humanity would begin its adventure with everything ready for it. [Sanhedrin 37a, 38a]

So, whether one believes the story of Creation to be true or not, it still teaches us humility, it still teaches us that no one should be held back because of his ancestry, and it still teaches us the supreme value of a human life.

## Have any 'miracles' been validated as natural?

Some biblical stories *have* been validated:

- The "Big Bang" creation of the universe.
- Matter creation out of nothing: Pair creation in physics out of pure energy is routine today.
- The evolution of life roughly follows the order given in the Torah: Plants, then fish, birds, reptiles, mammals, and finally people -- life forms became more and more complex.
- Time is relative, and passes faster when you move. What may seem like six days for one may be longer for another. This "twin effect" is verified routinely in laboratory.
- Torah does not tell, and science cannot deduce, what was going on before the Creation.

Many skeptics cite the absence of evidence for biblical stories. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

At the Passover Seder, the Talmud [Pesachim 116b] enjoins us to say:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים

In every generation, every Jew must view himself as if he was personally rescued from Egypt, as it is stated [in the Torah]:

And you shall tell your son on that day: It is because of what the Lord did for **me** when **I, myself**, came forth out of Egypt. [Exodus 13:8]

This means the lessons extracted from the Exodus are relevant to each person today.

As a physicist, I can tell you that biblical events are poor seconds in "weirdness" to the most successful physics theories of today: quantum mechanics and relativity. They are beyond weird, and nobody could have invented them. Note also that reason and logic always begin with unproved assertions – axioms. No unproven starting point, no logic. For traditional Jews, those axioms are the entire Torah, and they use logic to extract teachings from it.

Maimonides believed that the Torah is not intended to be history or science, but ethical teachings. In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, he writes:

Those passages in the Bible, which, in their literal sense, contain statements that can be refuted by proof, can and must be interpreted otherwise. [Rambam, Guide to the Perplexed, 2:25]

## **Should we retain the ethical teachings and reject the rest?**

Should biblical stories be viewed as just packaging for the ethical teachings? Some will say: Just keep the ethical teachings and throw out the packaging: No Shabbat rituals, no Passover Seder, no fasting on Yom Kippur, no dancing with Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah, no dwelling in Sukkot, no Purim carnivals, no beautiful songs of praise, etc. What would be lost?

Jewish continuity is inextricably tied to ritual. As Ahad ha-Am said:

More than Israel has kept Shabbat has Shabbat kept Israel.

Many will say that most ethical teachings are universal, and there is no need to be Jewish to observe them. For those who believe Judaism is more than the sum of its parts, rituals create memories and attachment, which lead to Jewish continuity from generation to generation.

Shabbat shalom.