

New Torah for Modern Minds, New York Times, March 9, 2002, 7, by Michael Massing

Abraham, the Jewish patriarch, probably never existed. Nor did Moses. The entire Exodus story as recounted in the Bible probably never occurred. The same is true of the tumbling of the walls of Jericho. And David, far from being the fearless king who built Jerusalem into a mighty capital, was more likely a provincial leader whose reputation was later magnified to provide a rallying point for a fledgling nation. Such startling propositions -- the product of findings by archaeologists digging in Israel and its environs over the last 25 years -- have gained wide acceptance among non-Orthodox rabbis. But there has been no attempt to disseminate these ideas or to discuss them with the laity -- until now.

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, which represents the 1.5 million Conservative Jews in the United States, has just issued a new Torah and commentary, the first for Conservatives in more than 60 years. Called "Etz Hayim" ("Tree of Life" in Hebrew), it offers an interpretation that incorporates the latest findings from archaeology, philology, anthropology and the study of ancient cultures. To the editors who worked on the book, it represents one of the boldest efforts ever to introduce into the religious mainstream a view of the Bible as a human rather than divine document. "When I grew up in Brooklyn, congregants were not sophisticated about anything," said Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" and a co-editor of the new book. "Today, they are very sophisticated and well read about psychology, literature and history, but they are locked in a childish version of the Bible."

"Etz Hayim," compiled by David Lieber of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, seeks to change that. It offers the standard Hebrew text, a parallel English translation (edited by Chaim Potok, best known as the author of "The Chosen"), a page-by-page exegesis, periodic commentaries on Jewish practice and, at the end, 41 essays by prominent rabbis and scholars on topics ranging from the Torah scroll and dietary laws to ecology and eschatology.

These essays, perused during uninspired sermons or Torah readings at Sabbath services, will no doubt surprise many congregants. For instance, an essay on Ancient Near Eastern Mythology," by Robert Wexler, president of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, states that on the basis of modern scholarship, it seems unlikely that the story of Genesis originated in Palestine. More likely, Mr. Wexler says, it arose in Mesopotamia, the influence of which is most apparent in the story of the Flood, which probably grew out of the periodic overflowing of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The story of Noah, Mr. Wexler adds, was probably borrowed from the Mesopotamian epic Gilgamesh.

Equally striking for many readers will be the essay "Biblical Archaeology," by Lee I. Levine, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "There is no reference in Egyptian sources to Israel's sojourn in that country," he writes, "and the evidence that does exist is negligible and indirect." The few indirect pieces of evidence, like the use of Egyptian names, he adds, "are far from adequate to corroborate the historicity of the biblical account." Similarly ambiguous, Mr. Levine writes, is the evidence of the conquest and settlement of Canaan, the ancient name for the area including Israel. Excavations showing that Jericho was unwallled and uninhabited, he says, "clearly seem to contradict the violent and complete conquest portrayed in the Book of Joshua." What's more, he says, there is an "almost total absence of archaeological evidence" backing up the Bible's grand descriptions of the Jerusalem of David and Solomon.

The notion that the Bible is not literally true "is more or less settled and understood among most Conservative rabbis," observed David Wolpe, a rabbi at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and a contributor to "Etz Hayim." But some congregants, he said, "may not like the stark airing of it." Last Passover, in a sermon to 2,200 congregants at his synagogue, Rabbi Wolpe frankly said that "virtually every modern archaeologist" agrees "that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way that it happened, if it happened at all." The rabbi offered what he called a "litany of disillusion" about the narrative, including contradictions, improbabilities, chronological lapses and the absence of corroborating evidence. In fact, he said, archaeologists digging in the Sinai have "found no trace of the tribes of Israel -- not one shard of pottery."

The reaction to the rabbi's talk ranged from admiration at his courage to dismay at his timing to anger at his audacity. Reported in Jewish publications around the world, the sermon brought him a flood of letters accusing him of undermining the most fundamental teachings of Judaism. But he also received many messages of support. "I can't tell you how many rabbis called me, e-mailed me and wrote me, saying, 'God bless you for saying what we

all believe,' " Rabbi Wolpe said. He attributes the "explosion" set off by his sermon to "the reluctance of rabbis to say what they really believe."

Before the introduction of "Etz Hayim," the Conservative movement relied on the Torah commentary of Joseph Hertz, the chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth. By 1936, when it was issued, the Hebrew Bible had come under intense scrutiny from scholars like Julius Wellhausen of Germany, who raised many questions about the text's authorship and accuracy. Hertz, working in an era of rampant anti-Semitism and of Christian efforts to demonstrate the inferiority of the "Old" Testament to the "New," dismissed all doubts about the integrity of the text. Maintaining that no people would have invented for themselves so "disgraceful" a past as that of being slaves in a foreign land, he wrote that "of all Oriental chronicles, it is only the Biblical annals that deserve the name of history."

The Hertz approach had little competition until 1981, when the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the official arm of Reform Judaism, published its own Torah commentary. Edited by Rabbi Gunther Plaut, it took note of the growing body of archaeological and textual evidence that called the accuracy of the biblical account into question. The "tales" of Genesis, it flatly stated, were a mix of "myth, legend, distant memory and search for origins, bound together by the strands of a central theological concept." But Exodus, it insisted, belonged in "the realm of history." While there are scholars who consider the Exodus story to be "folk tales," the commentary observed, "this is a minority view."

Twenty years later, the weight of scholarly evidence questioning the Exodus narrative had become so great that the minority view had become the majority one. Not among Orthodox Jews, however. They continue to regard the Torah as the divine and immutable word of God. Their most widely used Torah commentary, known as the Stone Edition (1993), declares in its introduction "that every letter and word of the Torah was given to Moses by God." Lawrence Schiffman, a professor at New York University and an Orthodox Jew, said that "Etz Hayim" goes so far in accepting modern scholarship that, without realizing it, it ends up being in "nihilistic opposition" to what Conservative Jews stand for. He noted, however, that most of the questions about the Bible's accuracy had been tucked away discreetly in the back. "The average synagogue-goer is never going to look there," he said.

Even some Conservative rabbis feel uncomfortable with the depth of the doubting. "I think the basic historicity of the text is valid and verifiable," said Susan Grossman, the rabbi of Beth Shalom Congregation in Columbia, Md., and a co-editor of "Etz Hayim." As for the mounting archaeological evidence suggesting the contrary, Rabbi Grossman said: "There's no evidence that it didn't happen. Most of the 'evidence' is evidence from silence." "The real issue for me is the eternal truths that are in the text," she added. "How do we apply this hallowed text to the 21st century?" One way, she said, is to make it more relevant to women. Rabbi Grossman is one of many women who worked on "Etz Hayim," in an effort to temper the Bible's heavily patriarchal orientation and make the text more palatable to modern readers. For example, the passage in Genesis that describes how the aged Sarah laughed upon hearing God say that she would bear a son is traditionally interpreted as a laugh of incredulity. In its commentary, however, "Etz Hayim" suggests that her laughter "may not be a response to the far-fetched notion of pregnancy at an advanced age, but the laughter of delight at the prospect of two elderly people resuming marital intimacy."

In a project of such complexity, there were inevitably many points of disagreement. But Rabbi Kushner says the only one that eluded resolution concerned Leviticus 18:22: "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence." "We couldn't come to a formulation that we could all be comfortable with," the rabbi said. "Some people felt that homosexuality is wrong. We weren't prepared to embrace that as the Conservative position. But at the same time we couldn't say this is a mentality that has been disproved by contemporary biology, for not everyone was prepared to go along with that." Ultimately, the editors settled on an anodyne compromise, noting that the Torah's prohibitions on homosexual relations "have engendered considerable debate" and that Conservative synagogues should "welcome gay and lesbian congregants in all congregational activities."

Since the fall, when "Etz Hayim" was issued, more than 100,000 copies have been sold. Eventually, it is expected to become the standard Bible in the nation's 760 Conservative synagogues. Mark S. Smith, a professor of Bible and Near Eastern Studies at New York University, noted that the Hertz commentary had lasted 65 years. "That's incredible," he said. "If 'Etz Hayim' isn't around for 50 years or more, I'd be surprised." Its longevity, however, may depend on the pace of archaeological discovery.