

Jan. 1, 1975

SA Taper
Dear Rabbi Lamm,

I hope that this letter finds you in the best of health and happiness. Allow me to introduce myself as an oleh chodosh from America. In the past I have read your books especially, Hedge of Roses, which I enjoyed immensely. Keep up the good work.

The topic of this letter regards the recent article in Time magazine about the Bible. You were quoted as saying: But Lamm, like most Orthodox Jews, allows much more latitude than fundamentalist Christians in understanding Genesis accounts. "Certainly the creation text is not literal", says Lamm. He is also not concerned, for instance, whether Noah and his family were the sole survivors of the biblical flood. What is important about Noah's story, he explains, "is the moral teaching that man's actions have consequences and that ultimately G-d's judgement encompasses all mankind".

First of all I am shocked that an orthodox Rabbi as yourself can be quoted as saying such. This sounds like apikorsus. What is meant that the Genesis account is not literal, certainly? Do we not believe that every word in the Torah was given by G-d to Moses? Isn't it a true account of history. If we say that it is "lav dafka" then we are "lav dafks", because if Abraham didn't necessarily exist and was only a parable, then we, his descendants are really non existant. How can we say that Noah was not the only survivor when the Torah explicitly states: 6-17 "And I-behold I do bring cessation of life through water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which the spirit of life is, from under the heaven, everything that is on the earth shall

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perish. 18- But with thee will I establish My covenant, thou shalt go into the ark, thou and thy sons and thy wife and thy son's wives with thee." I think that is very explicit that everybody was destroyed save Noah and his family. And if we will again say "lav dafka" then why draw the line there? Maybe Chazir or Tefillin is also "lav dafka"? And then what judgement is there to be if we are not obligated to do the Mitzvos of the Torah.

Rabbi, I hope and trust that you will write to Time magazine and correct this horrid mistake. Above all please tell them that this is not the opinion of "most orthodox Jews". Especially not mine and the schools of learning I was taught at.

May I finally point out that your philosophy has come about, I think because you gave reasons for the laws of Nidah. Giving reasons means that we have to rationalize and defend the precepts of the Torah. Why can't we accept them and do them just because G-d said so in His Torah? Yes Moshe emes and Toraso emes veanachnu badoim.

Yours truly,
[REDACTED]



PIONEER BIBLE CRITIC SPINOZA
Stressing its humanity.

of various modes of speaking which were suited to their own purpose and the mentality of their listeners"—a virtual endorsement of form criticism.

Among the biblical questions still being pondered by Catholic scholars is monogenism—the belief in one set of Adam-and-Eve “original parents”—as opposed to polygenism, the theory that evolution to human form occurred in many places at roughly the same time. Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani Generis* in 1950 cautiously left the door open regarding polygenism, pointing out that it “apparently” was not consistent with church doctrine on original sin. But Jesuit Francis McCool of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome says that “the scientific evidence for polygenism seems to have increased,” and he feels that the theory need not necessarily clash with the Scriptures. McCool stresses that whether Adam and Eve are viewed as individuals or symbols in *Genesis*, the story still carries the traditional teaching on original sin.

To Orthodox Jewish exegetes, like Catholics, modern critical methods were a stumbling block: by questioning Moses’ authorship of the Torah, biblical criticism cut to the heart of Jewish tradition. A modern Orthodox scholar like Rabbi Norman Lamm of Manhattan’s Yeshiva University still supports Mosaic authorship of the Torah because “it is a dogmatic necessity.” But Lamm, like most Orthodox Jews, allows much more latitude than fundamentalist Christians in understanding *Genesis* accounts. “Certainly the creation text is not literal,” says Lamm. He is also not concerned, for instance, whether Noah and his family were the sole survivors of the bib-

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lical flood. What is important about Noah’s story, he explains, “is the moral teaching that man’s actions have consequences and that ultimately God’s judgment encompasses all mankind.”

Liberal Jewish scholars tend to take Bible criticism for granted, but they no longer accept it as unquestioningly as they once did. Says Rabbi Eugene Borowitz of Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Manhattan: “The scientists are no longer the bishops. Reform scholars can now relax and show their true affinity to the Bible.”

The fact that biblical critics pick and choose among the supernatural events they accept baffled the late Anglican novelist-critic C.S. Lewis. He wondered at the selective theology of the Christian exegete who, “after swallowing the camel of the Resurrection, strains at such gnats as the feeding of the multitudes.” These critics would be apt to seek a naturalistic explanation for Jesus’ multiplication of loaves and fishes—for instance, that he inspired the crowd to share food they had hidden for themselves.

Whether such an interpretation is justified may well be questioned, but changing the event from a physical to a spiritual phenomenon does not necessarily undermine its value as a miracle. It is quite orthodox Christian theology that miracles are not meant to be simply marvels. That sort of thing, accepted as a commonplace in the 1st century world, was left to pagan magicians. A miracle, rather, is understood as a sign of God’s power to heal and save. George Bernard Shaw put it slightly differently. “A miracle,” he wrote, “is an event which creates faith.”

Compared with other ancient literature, the Bible contains relatively few miracles; mostly they accredit individuals through whom God’s promises are carried out: patriarchs, prophets, Jesus. Even very conservative Bible experts will now agree that the crossing of the Red Sea in *Exodus* can be too literally construed. Study shows that the Israelites apparently crossed the Sea of Reeds,

“DEMYTHOLOGIZER” RUDOLF BULTMANN



SILENCED SCIENTIST GALILEO
Contradicting Joshua.

a series of shallow lakes that once lay where the Suez Canal now runs. The high wind noted in *Exodus* could have made the lakes more easily fordable on foot—but not by the Egyptian chariots. None of that, however, really detracts from the immensity of the providential favor: in any event it helped to change permanently the way in which Jews thought of God.

The miracle of the virginal conception of Jesus is another problematic sign. Luke’s account of the Nativity clearly means to underline Jesus’ humanity: the shepherds, the humble surroundings, the hardships, the very fact of birth. The idea that he was born of a virgin, however, signifies an extraordinary event: a message that God’s will, and not man’s, was involved. New Testament Exegete Raymond Brown, probably the premier Catholic scriptural scholar in the U.S., is one of those who are deeply interested in the question of Jesus’ virginal conception. Brown—the only American member now on the Pontifical Biblical Commission—has cautiously suggested that the church reopen the question to concentrated scholarly research, at least partly because other Christians are calling the virgin birth into public question. But he is also wary of shocking the beliefs of the pious, and thus spends considerable time explaining biblical criticism to priests and lay people.

Brown combines a progressive approach to method and analysis of the Gospels with a careful attention to conserving some essence of fact. One telling example, in his widely used Anchor Bible commentary on *John*, is his treatment of the account of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus. The miracle is a vivid incident, placed at the very end of Christ’s ministry by the evangelist and cited as the