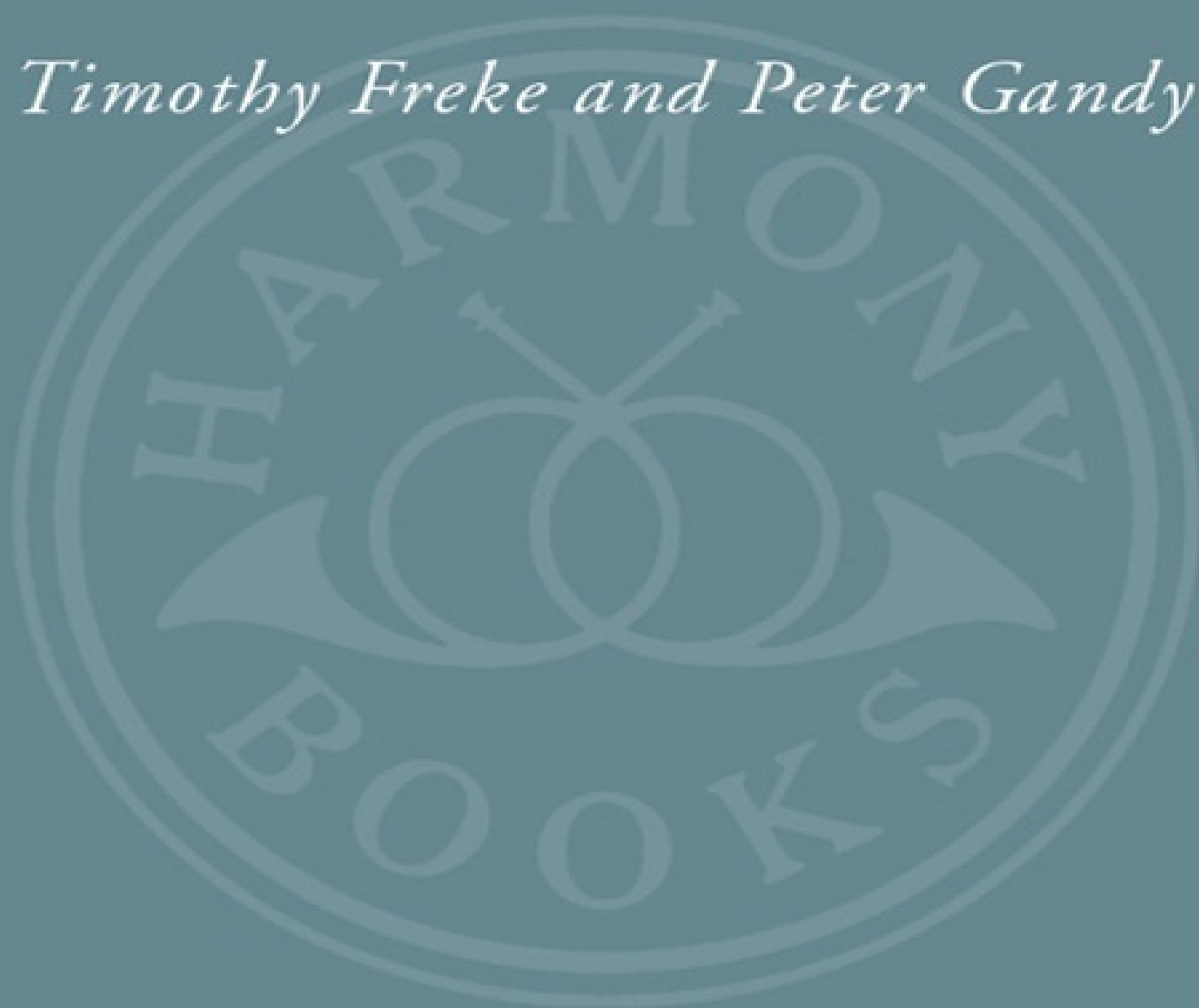


# THE LAUGHING JESUS

Religious Lies and Gnostic Wisdom

*Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy*



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# The Laughing Jesus



RELIGIOUS LIES  
AND  
GNOSTIC WISDOM

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TIMOTHY FREKE AND PETER GANDY

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This book is dedicated  
to all those who love  
their enemies



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## PART I

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# The Bathwater

1

## GNOSTIC SPIRITUALITY AND LITERALIST RELIGION

*The letter kills but the spirit brings to life.*

—PAUL, LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS<sup>1</sup>

Wake up! Rouse yourself from the collective coma you mistake for 'real life'. See through the illusion of separateness and recognize that we are all essentially one. Although we appear to be isolated

individuals, in reality there is one awareness dreaming itself to be everyone and everything. This is our shared essential nature. ~~The simple secret to enjoying this dream we call 'life' is to wake up to oneness.~~ Because, knowing you are one with all, you will find yourself in love with all. You will fall in love with living. This is the message of the original Christians, who symbolised this awakened state with the enigmatic figure of 'the laughing Jesus'.<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever seen a picture of Jesus laughing? Probably not, because we have inherited a distorted form of Christianity created by the Roman Church in the fourth century, which focuses exclusively on Jesus the 'man of sorrows'. The image that has dominated our culture is that of a man being tortured to death on a cross. But the original Christians didn't see Jesus as an historical man who 'suffered for our sins'. They viewed Jesus as the mythical hero of a symbolic teaching story, which represents the spiritual journey leading to the experience of awakening they called 'gnosis', or 'knowing'.

The original Christians were inspired men and women who saw how good life could be if we would just wake up and live in love. They imagined a new world that would no longer be divided into slaves or citizens, men or women, Gentiles or Jews. But inadvertently, this band of non-conformists gave birth to a totalitarian regime that would rule Europe with an iron fist for over a thousand years. The result was not Heaven on Earth, but the Holy Roman Empire. The dream became a nightmare.

The Roman Church did all it could to suppress the teachings of gnosis and the image of the laughing Jesus. It succeeded so well that it now seems strange to even suggest that Christianity was originally about awakening. But in the middle of the twentieth century some of the texts of the original Christians were found in a cave near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. In these texts the message of awakening is proclaimed loud and clear.

Those who have realised gnosis have set themselves free by waking up from the dream in which they lived and have become themselves again.<sup>3</sup>

How can you bear to be asleep, when it's your responsibility to be awake?<sup>4</sup>

You are asleep and dreaming. Wake up.<sup>5</sup>

Listen to my teachings, which are good and practical, and end the sleep which weighs so heavily upon you.<sup>6</sup>

People are caught up in many vain illusions and empty fictions, which torment them like sleepers prey to nightmares. When they wake up they see that all those dreams were nothing. This is the way it is with those who have cast ignorance aside, as if waking from sleep. They no longer see the world as real, but like a dream at night. They value gnosis as if it were the dawn. Whilst they exist in a state of ignorance it is as if everyone is asleep. Experiencing gnosis is like waking up.<sup>7</sup>

Such teachings of awakening are not exclusively Christian. Throughout history men and women of all faiths have woken up to oneness and love. We use the broad term 'Gnostic' meaning 'knower' to refer to all such individuals because, although they express their insights in the various languages of their diverse cultures, they all talk about the experience of awakening or gnosis.

These charismatic individuals often inspired the formation of small communities dedicated to waking up. But, ironically, the more successful such groups become the more they turn into the opposite. What begins as a loose alliance of free-thinking non-conformists degenerates over time into an organised, authoritarian religion, and people end up completely misunderstanding the original message. We refer to this degenerate form of Gnosticism as 'Literalism'.

Gnosticism is sometimes called ‘the perennial philosophy’ because it has been found in all cultures and all times. It is not that Gnostics all say exactly the same thing. They don’t. It is rather that the teachings are like fingers pointing from different perspectives to the same experience of gnosis. Unfortunately, most people focus on the finger and miss the point. This is Literalism. Literalist religions are clubs for people who want to worship the finger of their founder as the One True Finger, but who have no understanding of the experience of awakening towards which it points.

This book is a damning indictment of Literalist religion and a passionate affirmation of Gnostic spirituality. Let’s start by clearly discriminating Gnosticism from Literalism:

Gnostics teach that the important thing is to wake up and experience gnosis for ourselves.

Gnostics interpret their teachings as signposts pointing to the experience of awakening.

Gnostics use symbolic parables to communicate the way to wake up.

Gnostics know that all books contain the words of men.

Gnostics understand that the way the wisdom of awakening is expressed must constantly evolve to address the ever-changing human condition.

Gnostics want us to think for ourselves, so that we become more conscious and wake up.

Gnostics understand that life itself is a process of awakening.

Gnosticism is about waking up from the illusion of separateness to oneness and love.

Gnosticism unites us.

Literalists teach that the important thing is to blindly believe in religious dogmas.

Literalists see their teachings as literally the truth itself.

Literalists mistake Gnostic myths for literal accounts of miraculous historical events and end up lost in irrational superstition.

Literalists believe that sacred scripture is the Word of God.

Literalists want a fixed canon of scripture which has absolute authority for all time.

Literalists want us to believe what they believe so that we will join their cult.

Literalists believe their particular religion is the only way to the truth and condemn everyone else as lost in diabolical error.

Literalism keeps us asleep in an ‘us versus them’ world of division and conflict, inhabited by the ‘chosen’ and the ‘damned’.

Literalism divides us.

Throughout history Gnostics have ceaselessly exposed Literalist religion as a pernicious source of ignorance, division and suffering. This Gnostic message has never been more relevant than today. The three great religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—are on a collision course that threatens the security of the whole world. Taking religious myths literally is the root cause of the problems in the Middle East which led to 9/11 and a host of other atrocities since. But there is nothing new about religious violence. The present conflict is just the continuation of a long and gruesome history of killing and dying for God.

The burning of Christians by Pagans as flaming torches to light their games. The brutal Christian revenge on the Pagans. The relentless persecution of the Jews by Christians. The violent expansion of the Muslim empire and the bloody conquest of India. The barbaric crusades by Christians against the



Muslims. The horrors of the Inquisition. The genocide of indigenous people in the New World. The mass burnings of witches. All were motivated by the desire to please God. All were justified with reference to sacred texts that not only condoned such behaviour but demanded it. These evils have not occurred because the perpetrators were bad people, but because they were in the grip of very bad ideas.

## **The Baby and the Bathwater**

The time has come to say enough of this madness and consign Literalist religion to the garbage can of history. But we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Religion isn't all bad. It has answered the profound human yearning to understand the mysteries of life and death. It has inspired people of all cultures to create sublime works of art, glorious cathedrals and temples, and transcendental music and songs. It has this power because at its heart is Gnostic spirituality. In this book we want to rescue the teachings of gnosis from under the accumulated debris of religious dogma so that we can jettison outdated religious Literalism but retain and revivify the perennial wisdom of spiritual awakening.

Let's stop blindly believing in old books and listen instead to those heretical voices that have been drowned out by the cacophony of Literalist war cries. Just imagine for a moment that what Gnostics have been telling us throughout the ages is true. We appear to be separate, but essentially we are all one. The awareness that is conscious in you is the same awareness that is conscious in everyone. And if you recognise this, you will find yourself in love with all.

Imagine what would happen if we actually began to wake up and live by the Gnostic teachings of oneness and love. If we started to truly love our neighbours, and even our enemies, because we recognise that they are actually expressions of our own deeper self. If we saw through to the reality that there are no Jews, Christians or Muslims. There is no 'us versus them'. There is only us. This is the Gnostic vision that has inspired us to write this book.

In Part 1, 'The Bathwater,' we undertake a religious detox to flush the poison of Literalism out of our system. We take a good hard look at the supposedly 'sacred' scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and demonstrate that these texts are far from divine. We show that they were not written or inspired by God, but created by men. And often by the worst kind of men. Politicians dressed up as priests. In Part 2, 'The Baby,' we bring ancient Gnostic teachings to life, using modern language free from worn-out religious jargon. We give the timeless wisdom of awakening a make-over for the twenty-first century, so that you can experience gnosis, here and now, as you read this book. We want you to get the joke and understand for yourself why the Gnostic Jesus laughs.

## A RELIGIOUS DETOX

*The inhabitants of the earth are of two sorts.  
Those with brains, but no religion,  
and those with religion, but no brains.*

—ABU'L-ALA AL MA'ARRI, TENTH-CENTURY ISLAMIC POET<sup>1</sup>

'*Allahu Akbar*'! The *muezzin* cries a wake-up call to the world. The prayer reverberates through your head as the plane plunges towards the earth. 'There is no God but Allah'. Oh the divine ecstasy of finally surrender to the holy, triumphant, glorious will of Allah! 'Surrender' is the true meaning of 'Islam.' The true Muslim is one who has surrendered his entire being to Allah. And what greater surrender could there be than to shed one's blood in the great *jihad*? To become a martyr for Muhammad, may the blessings be upon him! One last thought before the inferno of hell explodes around you. The unbelievers who deserve to die will boil in the flames, but you will be transfigured in glory! Noise. Screams. Pain. It is done. 'God is great!'

## The Nightmare of Religion

9/11 was a wake-up call to the world. We need to wake up from the nightmare of religion. Because it was not just Islamic Literalism which led to the horrors of 9/11 and its brutal aftermath. Jewish and Christian Literalists also played their part. Let's look at the religious madness that has led to our present world crisis:

- On September 11, 2001, Islamic Literalists, believing they would each be rewarded by God in the afterlife with seventy-two virgins plus free passes to Heaven for their entire

family, martyred themselves and murdered thousands of other people by crashing jets into the twin towers in New York.

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- These Islamic Literalists were angry about the appropriation of Palestine by Jewish Literalists, whose sacred texts declare that God bequeathed this land to them.
- The Palestinian uprising was provoked when the Israeli prime minister walked around the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. This is a sacred site to Islamic Literalists because Muhammad stopped there one night to meet Abraham, Moses and Jesus, whilst on a trip to Heaven on a magic flying horse.
- To support the Palestinian uprising, Islamic Literalists attacked the U.S. because Christian Literalists in America strongly support the expansion of Israel. These Christian Literalists believe that only when the Jews have returned to the 'Holy Land' will Christ come again to bring about the end of the world, which they fervently hope will happen soon.
- In response to the brutal attack by Islamic Literalists, the Christian Literalist president of America, ignoring the New Testament injunction to 'love your enemies' and 'turn the other cheek', announced a 'crusade' to protect the 'civilised world'. Terrifying their people with thoughts of crazed religious extremists armed with weapons of mass destruction, crazed religious extremists who actually *were* armed with weapons of mass destruction unleashed Biblical 'shock and awe'.
- In reaction Islamic Literalists, ignoring Mohammad's advice to 'repay evil with good because then someone who was your enemy will become your friend', started cutting people's heads off on the Internet.
- And on and on it goes. Yet, in the midst of this tragic farce which is tearing the world apart, all these different religious Literalists find consolation in something wonderful that allows them to withstand the endless cycle of suffering. They are absolutely certain they are pleasing God.

Literalist religion is the greatest threat to world peace in the twenty-first century. In all of the world's trouble hotspots—the Balkans, Chechnya, Cyprus, East Timor, Kashmir, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Palestine, the Philippines, Sudan, the Middle East—religion is either the root cause of the trouble or one of the main contributing factors. In the West, we are told the danger is 'Islamic Fundamentalism', but it is religious Fundamentalism in all its forms that is the problem. And 'Fundamentalism' is no more than a new name for the extreme religion of Literalism that has bedevilled us for centuries. The divinely sanctioned violence that threatens our world today is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history religious terrorism has been the norm.

## **Religion Is the Devil's Greatest Achievement**

In our previous book *Jesus and the Lost Goddess*, we concluded that religion is the Devil's greatest achievement. ~~We were being deliberately provocative, of course, because we certainly don't think~~ there is some evil mega-being out there orchestrating all this chaos. But our point was serious. In our Western spiritual mythology the *diabolus* or Devil is the divider. He symbolises all that separates us in strife and prevents us uniting in love. And nothing is more horrendously divisive than Literalist religion. It is now, and always has been, a diabolical force of evil in the world.

It is easy to blame the current crisis on mad Muslims and to forget the horrors the West has perpetrated throughout history in the name of Christianity. Let us not forget the unspeakable suffering inflicted on Muslims and Jews during the Crusades. When Jerusalem fell to the crusaders they butchered more than seventy thousand Muslims in the Al-Aqsa mosque alone. They also burnt thousands of Jews alive in their synagogues. A Christian chronicler records 'our troops boiled adults in cooking-pots and impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled'.<sup>2</sup>

Let us recall the thousands of men, women and children condemned for heresy and burned alive by the Inquisition. Let us hold in our hearts those placed in the Torture Chair, with its wrought-iron mechanism for clamping the head still to enable the inquisitor to remove the heretic's tongue or teeth with ease, and its cunningly designed seat that allowed the insertion of torture instruments into the anus or vagina of the victim.

Let's not forget that the Catholic Church created the Inquisition in order to ethnically cleanse Spain of hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Jews, which it did with unimaginable brutality. The Inquisition then planned to put to death the three million inhabitants of the Netherlands simply because they had become Protestants, but fortunately it failed. One writer of the time declared the Inquisition to be a 'wild monster of such terrible mien that all of Europe trembles at the mere mention of its name'.<sup>3</sup>

But it was not just Europe that trembled before the torturers of the Holy Inquisition. When Columbus set out in his little boat he had red crusader crosses stitched to his sails. Columbus may have discovered the New World, but this was just a happy accident. He was actually looking for a way to sail around the world and attack the Muslim empire in the rear. When he discovered the Americas instead, Columbus wrote that he had found enough gold to recapture Jerusalem. In the New World the Spanish Inquisition repeated on an even grander scale the genocide they carried out so effectively in Europe. Hundreds of thousands, probably millions, of innocent indigenous Americans perished in unimaginable pain and suffering. They were burnt alive or tortured to death as a glorious testimony to the triumph of Christianity throughout the world.

Let us remember the relentless persecution of the Jews by Literalist Christians. Throughout Christian history Jews have been routinely burnt alive by zealous mobs with the full blessing of priests and popes. It was the Catholic Church in the thirteenth century who first forced the Jews to live in ghettos and to wear a yellow badge, a policy that the Vatican was still enforcing in the nineteenth century. In Eastern Europe the Inquisition used ovens to burn heretics, who were rubbed with grease and roasted alive. All that changed in the twentieth century was that the process was industrialised.

When the Fascists and Nazis started persecuting the Jews by humiliating them, depriving them of all rights, herding them into ghettos, killing and burning them, they were only doing what the Church

had done for centuries. When they introduced their racial purity laws they argued that they were merely following the lead of Catholicism's most respected religious order, the Jesuits. As a member of the Fascist Grand Council in Italy announced:

It comforts our souls to know that if, as Catholics, we became anti-Semites, we owe it to the teachings that the Church has promulgated over the past twenty centuries.<sup>4</sup>

Let's not forget that the Nazi SS who exterminated the Jews had emblazoned on their belt buckles the words 'God is with us'.

To those of us not afflicted with the insanity of religious Literalism, it seems impossible to understand how human beings could inflict such horrors on other human beings. But to those unfortunate enough to be in the grip of religious madness, these terrible crimes against humanity are seen in an entirely different way. They are righteous acts, required by God and justified by sacred scripture.

The burning to death of heretics was justified by a passage in *The Gospel of John*, which states:

He who does not abide in me is cast off as a withered branch; men gather these branches, throw them into the fire and they are consumed.<sup>5</sup>

The persecution of the Jews was legitimised by the New Testament, which makes it quite clear that the Jews were responsible for killing Christ, were born of the Devil and constituted a synagogue of Satan. The planned destruction of all Europe's Protestants and the mass murder of indigenous Americans were legitimised by the Old Testament, in which God orders his chosen people to butcher all those who stand in their divinely ordained way. God approves of ethnic cleansing. It says so in the Bible!

## Fundamentalism

In 2000 we wrote in the concluding chapter of our book *Jesus and the Lost Goddess*:

Feeling threatened and vulnerable, both Christian and Islamic Fundamentalists are growing edgy and excitable, and could do with a divinely sanctioned scrap to relieve the tension. There is nothing like holy conflict to galvanise support for religion—and Fundamentalists know it.

Our book hit the shelves as planes hit the twin towers. We are not prophets. It had been glaringly obvious for years that the great religions of the Western world were set on a collision course, because these faiths are becoming increasingly Fundamentalist.

Islamic Fundamentalists consider *none* of the existing Muslim states to be Islamic enough, not even Saudi Arabia, where Shari'a law demands amputation for simple theft, public beheading for adultery and sentences corrupters of the state to partial beheading followed by crucifixion. Some Christian Fundamentalists have aligned themselves with the Fascists and White Supremacists and advocate the wholesale murder of Jews, blacks and homosexuals. The born-again Christian Timothy McVeigh belonged to this particularly nasty strand of Christian Literalism and until 9/11 held the record for the largest peacetime bombing of civilians in America.

Some Jewish Fundamentalists condemn the very existence of modern Israel as sacrilege because they believe that only the Messiah should found a new Jewish state. They have made several attempts to bomb the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, because they want to build the Third Temple on its ruins. Their hero is a Jewish settler who entered the shrine of Abraham at Friday prayers and opened fire on Muslims with a machine gun. Another Jewish Fundamentalist gunned down the Israeli prime minister for even daring to talk about swapping some of the Jew's sacred land for peace with the Palestinians.

What causes Fundamentalists of all religions to be so extreme is that they have an absolute certainty that they are right and everyone else is wrong. And their absolute certainty comes from the fact that they believe that their opinions are God's opinions. Human opinions are relative, but God's opinions must, by definition, be absolute. There can be no argument with God. God's laws must be enforced. End of debate. This is why Fundamentalism, like Fascism, has nowhere to go but war.

The great irony is that Fundamentalists of different persuasions share much in common. The vision of life and how to live it is driven by the same needs and neuroses. What they hate in the other is a projection of what they hate in themselves. If they had been brought up in a different culture they would be Fundamentalists of another persuasion. This was dramatically illustrated after 9/11, when Christian Fundamentalists declared that the attack on the twin towers was divine retribution on America for tolerating feminism and homosexuality. It became immediately obvious that these so-called Christians had more in common with the Taliban than with the majority of compassionate people in their own country.

Two of the most prominent voices of America's religious right, televangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, declared live on TV that God allowed 9/11 to happen because he was 'mad' at America. Falwell declared:

Pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians . . . all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen'.

At the end of Falwell's rant, Robertson responded, 'Well, I totally concur'.<sup>7</sup> So if you were wondering where God was on the morning of 9/11, now you know. He was up there in those planes helping Islamic extremists commit mass murder because he's mad at America for being so tolerant!

Fundamentalists hate the modern world. But this should not surprise us. Literalists have consistently opposed progress. The Church opposed the abolition of slavery because it is legitimised in both the Old and New Testaments. It opposed the introduction of anaesthetic during childbirth because the Bible says that women are meant to suffer whilst giving birth. It opposed the introduction of inoculation because it is up to God to decide who lives and who dies. Today the Catholic church condemns the use of condoms, which has led to millions contracting AIDS, a dogma which is the cause of so much avoidable suffering that it must rank as one of the greatest evils of all times.

Yet Fundamentalists aren't opposed to all that modernity offers. After all, Fundamentalists of all persuasions are more than happy to arm themselves to the teeth with the poison fruit of modernity's deadly weaponry. The Taliban may have detested video players, tape recorders and televisions, but they liked nothing better than riding into battle on the back of a Toyota pick-up armed with a Kalashnikov rifle.

Religious Fundamentalism is an irrational pathology which leads otherwise decent men and women to become enemies of open-mindedness and big-heartedness, and enlist in the service of divinely sanctioned bigotry. Fundamentalism creates dangerously self-righteous people who turn against those who espouse the truly spiritual values of love, tolerance and understanding. Fundamentalists particularly loathe members of their own faith who suggest dialogue with the other. A Hindu Fundamentalist murdered Mohandas Gandhi. An Islamic Fundamentalist murdered Malcolm X. A Christian Fundamentalist murdered John Lennon. A Jewish Fundamentalist murdered Yitzhak Rabin.

But Fundamentalists aren't just monsters. They are often moved by their strong religious convictions to great generosity and compassion. But this is strictly limited to 'us' and not 'them'. Before the Israeli army assassinated him, the wheelchair-bound Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was the 'spiritual' inspiration of Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist/liberation group (delete according to your prejudices), and a well-respected figure within his own community responsible for setting up schools and social programmes. But he was also responsible for the murder of Israeli children.

Fundamentalism is a fundamental misunderstanding of history, spirituality and the nature of reality which causes ordinary people to commit terrible acts for pious reasons. This is the story of a kind and thoughtful gentleman called Anwar Shaikh. Now in his seventies, he is known for his books that criticise the Qur'an. For this brave work he has been branded an apostate who 'deserves to be killed by Islamic Fundamentalists.'<sup>8</sup> But in 1947, during the partition of India and Pakistan, Anwar was himself a young Islamic Fundamentalist possessed by religious zeal. Determined to please Allah by revenging the murder of his Muslim brothers, he went into the streets of Lahore and battered to death three innocent Sikhs, two with a club and the third with a spade. He writes:

You know a madness gripped us in 1947. A madness. I was a part of it. When I was killing them all I could think of was revenge. I knew I was destined for the Islamic paradise, where scores of Houris were waiting for me. Seventy virgins with upright breasts and Allah would give me enough virility for eighty-four years. What more could a young man want? So you see, not only was I unafraid, but even looking forward to continuous sex in Heaven. You don't believe me. Please believe me. I believed it at the time. I was young and impressionable.

I kept thinking, as I still do, that I have destroyed three innocent lives. They might have been alive had it not been for me. I don't even know who they were. And I began to think. All this happened because of religion. I had never given up reading the Qur'an. Now I read it with wide-open eyes. One day I read something I had read hundreds of times before: 'O Believers, do not walk in front of the prophet. Do not raise your voice above his,' And I asked myself why? Why should Allah raise one human above others? Well, once you ask why, you can never stop. The spell was broken.

Whatever happens now I will die confident in my humanist and rationalist beliefs, and if my writings have weaned even a few dozen people away from religious hatred and fanaticism I feel I will have partially redeemed myself, even though nothing, nothing can bring my three victims back to life. I don't worry for myself. I worry for others. Look what we did to each other with our bare hands. With nuclear weapons they could destroy everything in the name of religion. They might, you know. They might.<sup>9</sup>

## Armageddon

Anwar Shaikh's plaintive warning needs to be heard, because Fundamentalists could indeed destroy the world. In Pakistan Islamic Fundamentalists boast that in ten years time they will control the arms and so command nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> But we don't need to wait for Fundamentalists to get their fingers on the nuclear button, we've had that for decades in the U.S., where Christian Fundamentalists



sincerely believe that their divine mission is to co-operate with God's great plan for the end of the world, which they interpret as a coming nuclear holocaust.

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One week before announcing his candidacy for president in 1980 Ronald Reagan told a reporter 'We may be the generation that sees Armageddon'. Jerry Falwell told a reporter that President Reagan agreed with him on Bible prophecy and had said, 'Jerry, we are heading very fast for Armageddon now'. Reagan's Secretary of Defence, Caspar Weinberger, told students at Harvard University: 'I have read the Book of Revelation, and, yes, I believe the world is going to end . . . and every day I think the time is running out'.<sup>11</sup> At the time Weinberger was head of the Pentagon and second in command of America's nuclear weapons. Such beliefs by those in possession of such diabolical power raises the alarming possibility of the Biblical warning of the end of the world becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A recent report showed that almost four out of ten Americans believe that when the Bible prophesies that the Earth will be destroyed by fire, it's predicting a nuclear war.<sup>12</sup> But, according to some Christian Fundamentalists, this glorious day can't come until the Jews who were scattered throughout the world are re-established in the Old Testament Kingdom of David. Then a pleasant place outside Jerusalem called Armageddon will become the site of the last great battle between good and evil and Jesus will come again to wrap things up.

The desire to help fulfil Biblical prophecy has led Christian Fundamentalists in the U.S. to form an unholy alliance with Jewish Fundamentalists intent on re-establishing the mythical Kingdom of David. But this alliance only goes so far. For Fundamentalist Christians, once the Kingdom of David is re-established the news is not so great for the Jews. When the End Days come it is only Christians (of the right denomination of course) who will ascend to Heaven. The Jews, like the rest of us, must convert or burn.

Christian Fundamentalists are increasingly apocalyptic. *Left Behind* is one of a series of books that exploit the Fundamentalist belief that we are heading for 'The Rapture'. This is the moment when all born-again Christians will be lifted off planet Earth to Heaven. While this may sound like the plot of a sci-fi B Movie, the authors are deadly serious and have sold over sixty million copies in the U.S. Once what remains of the blasted and radioactive planet Earth 'gentle Jesus' will set up his torture camp called Hell. Here those of us who are unfortunate enough to have been 'left behind' will be tormented for eternity. In the light of this it comes as no surprise that Christian Fundamentalist politicians see no point in cooperating to prevent global warming. They believe it is going to get a lot hotter than even the environmentalists can imagine!

It seems incredible that people can get away with such nonsense in this day and age, especially since Christianity has been bleating on that 'The End is Nigh' for two thousand years and it still hasn't happened. In the gospels Jesus repeatedly assures his disciples that the end of the world will come in their lifetime. But here we are two thousand years later and none of the things that Jesus predicted have happened.<sup>13</sup> To continue to peddle this prophecy when Jesus himself got it wrong doesn't make sense. But, then, Fundamentalists don't need things to make sense. They have willingly abandoned rationality in favour of blind faith in old books.



# Literacy, Literature and Literalism

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Fundamentalism manifests in many different forms, but it can be reduced to one very simple idea. Sacred scripture is the infallible Word of God. The name 'Fundamentalism' was coined after the publication of a book called *The Fundamentals*, by a group of conservative American priests in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> The book's central axiom is that everything the Bible says is true, historical and has literally happened as described. It is not possible to believe anything less and still be a Christian. Viewed in this way Fundamentalism is clearly not new, for this could hardly be described as a novel way of viewing the Bible.

Christian Literalists have taught for centuries that the Bible is literally true. For nearly two millennia the Church controlled every aspect of an individual's life, right down to what they were allowed to think, and justified this with reference to 'sacred scripture'. As every other way of looking at life had been violently suppressed, there was no alternative to the Christian worldview. There was no way out of the circular thinking that states: 'Everything in this book is true. How do I know? Because it says so in this book'.

Prior to the invention of books, in oral cultures traditions underwent subtle changes as they were transmitted, just as in the game of Chinese Whispers. Change was inevitable if only because of the imperfection of human memory. Outdated, inappropriate or irrelevant ideas could be discreetly dropped and new ones incorporated. But with the invention of writing this flexibility was lost. When traditions came to be 'written in stone', they became immutable.

No sooner had humans begun writing than God Himself started publishing. Literalism's big idea was born. God writes books. He might occasionally use a secretary, such as Moses or Muhammad, but nonetheless he likes to communicate with his subjects via the written word. A new genre called 'sacred scriptures' was created. Sacred scriptures are special and off-limits to the kind of criticism that might be applied to any other piece of literature.

Human beings had long known that words were power, but when they invented writing they learned that the written word can wield power for eternity. Literalist religion is fixated by the written word. Moses came down the mountain with written laws. The Jews are known as the People of the Book. Christianity famously declares, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. Muhammad was illiterate, but Allah brought him a written message, and taught him to read and write.

It soon became compulsory for every religion to have its sacred text and they quickly multiplied. As long as people lived inside a hermetically sealed culture, with only one religion and one sacred text, everything was fine. But wherever cultures collided it soon became apparent that there were many different sacred scriptures inspired by many different gods saying a variety of contradictory things. By definition only one of these religions can be the one true religion. But which one?

It is to prevent people asking such questions that Fundamentalists want to enforce the reading of only their special book. This is an old ploy that has been used by Literalists for millennia. The Roman Church made huge bonfires of Pagan libraries and destroyed all the works of those 'heretics' who had

the audacity to challenge them. It continued to use Latin for centuries after it ceased to be the language of the people to ensure that no one spotted the inconsistencies with which the Bible was riddled. To guarantee that the Church's interpretation of the Bible would not be questioned it was made illegal for anyone but clergy to read it. Any layperson caught in possession of a Bible was executed.

It was only after the Protestant Reformation that the Bible was translated into the common tongue due to the heroic struggle of brave individuals who faced torture and execution for their efforts. The foundation stone of the Reformation was the right of all men and women to read the Bible in their own language. The outcome was exactly as the Church had feared. When people began to study the text for themselves the idea that the Bible was the infallible Word of God became increasingly questioned. Now, after three centuries of careful scholarship, it has become obvious that the Bible is actually just another eclectic, contradictory and quirky piece of archaic literature.

## Therapy for the Western Soul

It is time to break the spell of the written word. Sacred texts are meant to be just the media, but with Literalism the media has become the message. These so-called 'sacred scriptures' are dangerous documents that have held us under their thrall for too long. Devotion to a book is simply another form of idolatry. These books are not the Word of God, they are the words of men, and often men with a patently political agenda. It is time we woke up from the nightmare of Literalism, and even some within the Christian Church are beginning to admit as much. The Reverend John Shelby Spong, Bishop of Newark, writes:

I look at the authority of the Scriptures as one who has been both nurtured by and then disillusioned with the literal Bible. My devotion to the Bible was so intense that it led me into a study that finally obliterated any possibility that the Bible could be related to on a literal basis. . . . A literal Bible presents me with far more problems than assets. It offers me a God I cannot respect, much less worship.<sup>15</sup>

Our sacred texts purport to be the collective memories of our deepest past. They claim to tell us who we are and where we came from. They represent our collective identity as surely as our individual memories represent our individual identity. Now imagine for a moment that you woke up one morning and everything you thought you knew about yourself was untrue. Your name was not your true name. Your parents were not your real parents. Your whole identity was a fabrication. This is how it is with our so-called sacred texts, for they are not what they purport to be. They have been wilfully distorted, badly remembered and wrongly interpreted. They have mangled our memories and the outcome has been disastrous. We are victims of an enormous 'False Memory Syndrome' and are in desperate need of collective therapy.

People go into therapy because they can no longer go forward in their lives. They often discover that their present problems arise out of past trauma, and that in order to go forward they must first go back. We suggest that the same holds true for cultures. We must face up to the truth about our past. We have a terrible history of religious intolerance and have inflicted the most atrocious sufferings on our neighbours in the name of God. If we don't learn from our mistakes, we will most certainly repeat them.

The horrors of 9/11 revealed that Literalism remains rife in the world. Our response is to mount a full-scale assault on the pernicious idea that God writes books. Armed with the latest discoveries from modern historians and archaeologists, we intend to undermine the very foundations of Literalist religion. In the next three chapters we will demonstrate that the ‘sacred scriptures’ of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not special ‘holy’ books. They are just *books*.

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## THE WORD OF GOD?

*God's Bible? Look at it.  
It was made as a lie by the false pen of scribes.*

—THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH<sup>1</sup>

Six thousand years ago God created the universe in six days and then took a day off. He made Adam out of dust and breath, and then he made Eve from Adam's rib to keep him company. God kept Adam and Eve in a garden, but one day they broke the rules so he had to kick them out. Adam and Eve had kids, but one of them killed his own brother. This was just the start of a series of disappointments for God. In fact, human beings turned out to be such a bad idea that God sent a flood to destroy them. Noah and his family were saved, and when the flood receded they went forth and peopled the Earth.

In 2000 BCE Noah's descendant Abraham moved to Canaan, where he became the founding patriarch of the Jewish people. But a few centuries later the Jews were enslaved by the Egyptians. Then, in an event called the Exodus, they miraculously escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The Jews now wandered around the desert for forty years before finally arriving back at the land that God had promised them in Palestine. Unfortunately, this was occupied by Canaanites, but with God's help the Jews managed to clear the land under the leadership of Joshua.

The Jews went on to create a powerful state under King Saul and his successor, King David, who ruled a united monarchy that included both the north and south of Palestine. David's kingdom reached all the way to Egypt in the south, the Euphrates in the east and Samaria and Galilee in the north. David's son Solomon built a lavish temple to the God who had made the Jews such a big success. Solomon was really clever. But sadly he forgot that the Jews were special because they only worshipped the one true God. Angry at Solomon for worshipping other gods, God punished the Jews by allowing the Babylonians to enslave them. About fifty years later he relented and the Jews returned

to Jerusalem where they built another temple. And here they lived in happy prosperity right down to the time of Alexander the Great.

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The sacred scripture that Jews call the Tanakh and Christians call the Old Testament tells the story of the Jews from Adam to Alexander. The message is clear. The Jews are an extremely ancient nation with a well-documented history going back millennia. This claim is confirmed by the Jewish calendar. In Europe at the time we are writing it is the year 2004, but in Jerusalem it is a whopping 5764. To put this date into perspective, this puts the beginning of Jewish history over thirteen hundred years before the Egyptian pyramids. It's all very impressive, until you start looking for the evidence to justify it.

Travellers to Egypt will have seen the vast temples and impressive monuments that litter the landscape. Texts, sculpture and artefacts testify to a sophisticated culture that really did endure for millennia. Much the same can be said for Mesopotamia, the so-called 'cradle of civilisation'. So, what have we discovered in Palestine that dates from these early periods? Nothing but the typical garbage and potsherds of a few wandering nomads and pastoralists.

It has sometimes been argued that Palestine was invaded so often that nothing aboveground has survived. However, sub-surface investigations have also revealed nothing of significance. No grand palaces, temples or dressed stone buildings that would justify the claims of a grand empire centred on Jerusalem have been found. If they had they would now be on the immensely lucrative Bible-tourism trail. But they aren't.

It has been obvious for centuries that stories such as Adam and Eve are myths with no basis in history. But what about the rest of the Tanakh? Is that history? The evidence suggests not. Rather than the Tanakh is a collection of myths and legends. And to be fair to the Tanakh it never actually claims to be history. In fact you won't find the word *history* anywhere in its pages, because the word did not even exist in Hebrew. We have projected back onto these ancient texts our modern idea of history as distinct from mythology, a concept that simply did not exist at the time.

Thomas Thompson, professor of Old Testament studies at the University of Copenhagen, writes:

Today we no longer have a history of Israel. Not only have Adam and Eve and the flood story passed over to mythology, but we can no longer talk about a time of the patriarchs. These images have no place in descriptions of the real historical past. We know them only as story and what we know about such stories does not encourage us to treat them as if they were or were ever meant to be historical. There is no evidence of a United Monarchy, no evidence of a capital in Jerusalem or of any coherent, unified political force that dominated western Palestine, let alone an empire of the size the legends describe. We do not have evidence for the existence of kings named Saul, David or Solomon; nor do we have evidence for any temple at Jerusalem in this early period.<sup>2</sup>

Israel Finkelstein, director of archaeology at Tel Aviv University, and his co-writer, Neil Silberman describe the Bible as 'no more historical than the Homeric saga of Odysseus or Aeneas's founding of Rome. The biblical narrative is so thoroughly filled with inconsistencies and anachronisms . . . that it must be considered more of an historical novel than an accurate historical chronicle'.<sup>3</sup>

## The Tanakh's A-List Celebrities

Let's have a look at some of the heroes of the Tanakh to see if there is any evidence of them actually being real historical people.

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## Abraham

Abraham is considered to be the great patriarch of the Jewish nation. He is also an important figure for Christians and Muslims. Evidence for his existence is crucial to the idea that these three religions might all be 'Sons of Abraham', as is often claimed. According to Biblical chronology Abraham moved to Canaan about 2100 BCE. But this is impossible as Abraham is said to have come from the Chaldean city of Ur that did not exist until after 1000 BCE. Prior to this date there were no Chaldeans. *Genesis* tells us that Abraham's son Isaac sought help from Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, yet the Philistines were not a presence in the area until after 1200 BCE. And although the camel is mentioned frequently in the stories of Abraham and the other patriarchs, the domestication of the camel did not happen until around 1000 BCE. The camel caravan described frequently in the Tanakh with its cargo of 'gum, balm, and myrrh', did not become widespread until the eighth century BCE.

## Moses

There is no evidence for the existence of Moses. Although he is portrayed as an influential member of the Egyptian royal household, he is not mentioned in any Egyptian record. Nor is there any evidence to support the idea that the Jews were ever held captive in Egypt or that they made an exodus from that country under Moses' command. The Egyptians chronicled their history in great detail but make no mention of any captive Jews. Amongst the hundreds of thousands of Egyptian monuments, inscriptions, tomb inscriptions and papyri, there is complete silence about the '600,000 men on foot besides women and children' who *The Book of Exodus* tells us escaped from Pharaoh's armies.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Moses, with its many miracles, has all the hallmarks of a myth. The account of Moses' birth is a retelling of the myth of the birth of Sargon the Great, the king of Akkad, which is known in a number of variations from the early sixth century BCE. Like Moses, the child Sargon is 'set in a basket of rushes' and 'cast into the river', from which he is later rescued by an influential woman. Similar Greek stories tell of the child Dionysus confined in a chest and thrown into the river Nile. They probably all go back to Egyptian stories which tell of Osiris confined in a chest and thrown in the Nile.

## Joshua

According to the Tanakh Joshua is the great general who leads the devastating invasion of the 'Promised Land' of Canaan, but evidence for this is non-existent. Indeed, the invasion of Canaan by Jews escaping the Egyptians is an historical impossibility. From the fourteenth to the twelfth century BCE, when the exodus is supposed to have occurred, Canaan was a province of Egypt, so the Jews

would not have escaped from Egyptian rule at all, but merely passed from one Egyptian territory another. *The Book of Joshua*, which relates the Jews supposed invasion of the Promised Land, makes no mention of Egyptians in Canaan, when the area should have been crawling with them.<sup>5</sup>

In 1999 Professor Ze'ev Herzog of the University of Tel Aviv's Institute of Archaeology published an article in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, entitled 'Deconstructing the Walls of Jericho'.<sup>6</sup> In it he declares that the exodus from Egypt, the invasion by Joshua and the famous walls of Jericho are all without historical foundation. He laments:

These facts have been known for years, but Israel is a stubborn people and nobody wants to hear about it.<sup>7</sup>

Although his views are widely shared in the academic community, Herzog's article caused a furor with secular Israelis responding the most violently. The reason is simple. They immediately recognised that the modern state of Israel would be seriously compromised if its claim to the land turned out to be based on a mere myth.

## David

What about David? Did he exist? In 1993 an inscription was found at Tel Dan that referred to a 'king of the dynasty of David'. No previous reference to David had ever been found outside of the Tanakh. The finding became world news and made the front page of the *New York Times* and the cover of *Time* magazine. Here, at last, was the first ever independent verification of one of the Bible's leading players. Here was evidence for the historical existence of King David, who ruled over the united monarchy of Israel and Judea. The famous singer of psalms, slayer of Goliath and forefather of Jesus. But ten years of careful investigation has revealed that the inscription is not evidence for the existence of David at all.

For a start, the translation 'king of the dynasty of David' gives you an impression of an imposing inscription that might have adorned a mighty palace. In fact it is a scribbling of six letters on a piece of stone—*bytdwd*. The first word claimed to be 'king' has been reconstructed from just one letter, so it could actually mean any number of things. As there are no vowels in written Hebrew these have to be inserted, which leads to many possible translations of the inscription. The word translated 'David' could also be translated 'beloved', 'uncle' or even 'kettle'!<sup>8</sup> It could equally be the name of a place called *Beth Dod*. Another recently discovered inscription has also been declared to refer to the 'House of David', but the Hebrew on this inscription is different from the one at Tel Dan.<sup>9</sup> What is going on here?

The problem is that when something is discovered that could, at a stretch, be seen as corroborating something in the Bible, a whole bunch of a priori beliefs ensure that the evidence is made to fit the theory. One modern scholar considers the idea that the Tel Dan inscription refers to David as just wishful thinking, a classic case of scholars working back from the Bible rather than forward from the evidence.<sup>10</sup> Another scholar is 'convinced that the published fragments in fact belong not to one but to two different, related inscriptions'.<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have found indications that the inscriptions are forgeries and the whole subject is now under investigation by the Israeli Department of Antiquities.



The antiquities market is littered with such fakes because there are so many wealthy and powerful groups with a desperate desire to prove that the Bible is true. Any discovery that appears to validate the Bible is guaranteed to make world news, but when it is later debunked it rarely makes the back pages.

Even if David did exist he cannot possibly have been the mighty king described in the Tanakh. At the time when he is said to have ruled over a large and sophisticated civilisation, the real world archaeology has revealed 'only a few dozen very small scattered hamlets and villages' supporting farmers who 'numbered hardly more than two thousand persons'.<sup>12</sup> If David existed at all he can have been little more than a hill country chieftain. As one recent commentator observes:

The chief disagreement nowadays is between those who hold that David was a petty hilltop chieftain whose writ extended no more than a few miles in any direction, and a small but vociferous band of 'biblical minimalists' who maintain that he never existed at all.<sup>13</sup>

## Solomon

So what about David's son Solomon? He is said to have had a harem of three hundred concubines and seven hundred wives, which included Egyptian, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Zidonian and Hittite princesses. According to the Bible he ruled a vast empire. He had a fleet of ships that traded with the Egyptians and Mesopotamians on equal terms. He was so wealthy that his soldiers had shields of gold. He was so famous for his wisdom that even the Queen of Sheba paid him a visit. He spent thirteen years building a palace to house the Ark of the Covenant, and embellished it with gold and precious jewels. Surely somebody somewhere should have heard of him.

Yet there is no evidence for the existence of Solomon. It is said that he was married to the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh, but no reference to this dynastic alliance has been found in any of the Egyptian records. His name is not mentioned in any contemporary Middle Eastern text. But none of this should surprise us, as at this time Jerusalem was not the capital of a vast empire. It was actually just a small village.

Around 1000 BCE the highlands of Judea contained no public buildings, palaces, store-houses or temples. Signs of any sophisticated kind of record keeping, such as writing, seals and seal impressions, are almost completely absent. Almost no luxury items, imported pottery or jewellery have been found. The population of the entire region can have been no more than forty-five thousand people. Whoever was living in the Palestinian highlands at this time, they were not the people the writers of the Tanakh have put there.

## The Myth of Return

The Tanakh would have us believe that there once was a mighty kingdom of Israel with its great capital Jerusalem. But there is very little evidence concerning either Israel or Jerusalem. The first v



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