

Preface

The Genesis and Evolution of “The Hesterville Bible Trial”

The idea for this book was born in 2005, not in my head but in the head of my good friend Rabbi Pinchas Stolper זצ"ל, to whose memory this book is dedicated. Actually, I did not know Rabbi Stolper when he first approached me. He had served for many years as executive vice president of the Orthodox Union and national director of the National Council of Synagogue Youth. After he retired, he moved to Lakewood, New Jersey, where I live, and turned his full attention to the study of biblical archaeology. Rabbi Stolper was looking for someone to write a book to defend classical Judaism against the minimalists who claim the Old Testament is a fraud.

Several years earlier, I had co-authored a book called “One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues that Divide Them” with Ammiel Hirsch, a prominent Reform rabbi. It was essentially an exchange of emails, a ferocious battle in cyberspace that pitted our ideologies against each other.

Although there are undoubtedly many paths to God, Orthodox Judaism believes that the Jewish path requires strict observance of the Torah's commandments. Therefore, the Orthodox rabbinate eschews dialogue or debate with the liberal streams so as to avoid the impression that there are other le-

gitimate Jewish paths. When the suggestion of writing a book with a Reform rabbi was presented to me, I asked several venerable rabbis if such a project would violate the general rule since I am technically not a practicing member of the rabbinate; I am a Talmudic scholar, an academic, and hold no official rabbinic position. Because there is so much misinformation about Orthodoxy in the liberal communities, these rabbis encouraged me to take on the project.

The book, which was published by Random House, caused quite a media sensation. It also triggered serious blowback in the Orthodox community, which generated even more media attention. Considering that my works on Talmudic civil law are studied in yeshivos worldwide and have even entered the Torah canon, many rabbis disagreed with the premise that I do not represent the rabbinate. Some were also uncomfortable with exposing the rank and file of the Orthodox community to heretical views. Unwilling to risk a controversy that might damage the reputation of my scholarly works, I said my mea culpas and dropped out of a scheduled seventeen-city book tour. Over time, it fortunately became clear that I had weathered the storm.

Among the subjects discussed in the book were biblical archaeology and the documentary hypothesis. These were not my fields of special expertise, but with the help of others, I was able to mount a strong defense of the authenticity of the Old Testament. Having read “One People, Two Worlds,” Rabbi Stolper was convinced I was the writer he was seeking.

At first, I demurred. Even though I had some qualifications for writing such a book, the scope of this project was too daunting. It would require an inordinate amount of research. There had to be others better qualified than I was. Rabbi Stolper asked that I at least give it some serious thought. He claimed that my studies of Talmudic civil law showed my analytic skills and that my Torah commentaries showed a deep knowledge and understanding of the texts. He promised to

provide me with the books of the leading professors on both sides of the argument and any other source materials I felt I would need. It was important that it be done, and he didn't have anyone else. In the meantime, he argued, thousands of college kids were being turned away from their religion.

At our next meeting, I had already looked through some of the books he had given me, and I thought I might be able to counter some of their arguments effectively. The problem, I told Rabbi Stolper, was that I didn't think any book I wrote would have any appreciable effect. On the one side was almost the entire academic establishment that accepted the views of the Bible critics and archaeological minimalists as dogma, and who was on the other side? A Talmudic scholar from Lakewood. I would be dismissed, and nothing I said would be taken seriously.

The only way forward, I suggested, was to circumvent academia and make the case directly to the public. My thought was to write a legal thriller, a novel that somehow involved a Bible trial. I would present both sides of the argument and let the readers decide for themselves. The book would inevitably be slanted toward one side of the argument. I could not deny the influence of bias, but then again, there was bias on both sides. I did resolve to make a good faith effort to present both sides fairly and honestly. All the witnesses in the trial would present the views of prominent professors and the respective sides of the argument. Hopefully, the truth will speak for itself.

The goal of this book was not to prove or disprove the veracity of prophecy or divine intervention in a supernatural manner. It was to establish the historical period during which the Old Testament was written. Was it written more or less during the time it claimed to have been written, which would lend credence to its narrative, or was it written a thousand years later, which would indeed expose it as a hoax? It would be a battle of science against science.

There was one problem, however. The controversy that sur-

rounded “One People, Two Worlds” was partially triggered by the exposure of readers to heretical views. Would this book spark the same sort of controversy?

In January 2005, Rabbi Stolper and I flew to Jerusalem to present the question to Rabbi Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, the leading Torah sage in the world. If he said we could not present both sides in a trial format, I would step away from the project.

Rabbi Elyashiv was open to the idea and even enthusiastic. He did insist that we should not leave the issue as a teiku, an unresolved question. The trial had to end with a positive verdict, to which we, of course, agreed. The rabbi gave us his warm blessings, and we returned to the States. The meeting is memorialized in a letter from Rabbi Stolper addressed to me dated September 19, 2010.

“I am writing this letter to you for the record,” he wrote. “In January 2005, I asked you to write a book countering the heretical writings of the minimalist archaeologists and biblical critics who contend that the Bible is a myth. These professors exert a powerful influence on the hundreds of thousands of young Jewish people who attend colleges and universities all over the world, and it is important to challenge and disprove their claims. You suggested that the most effective way of reaching the largest readership would be to write a gripping novel, titled *The Bible Trial*, centered on a trial in which the authenticity of the Bible is examined and verified.

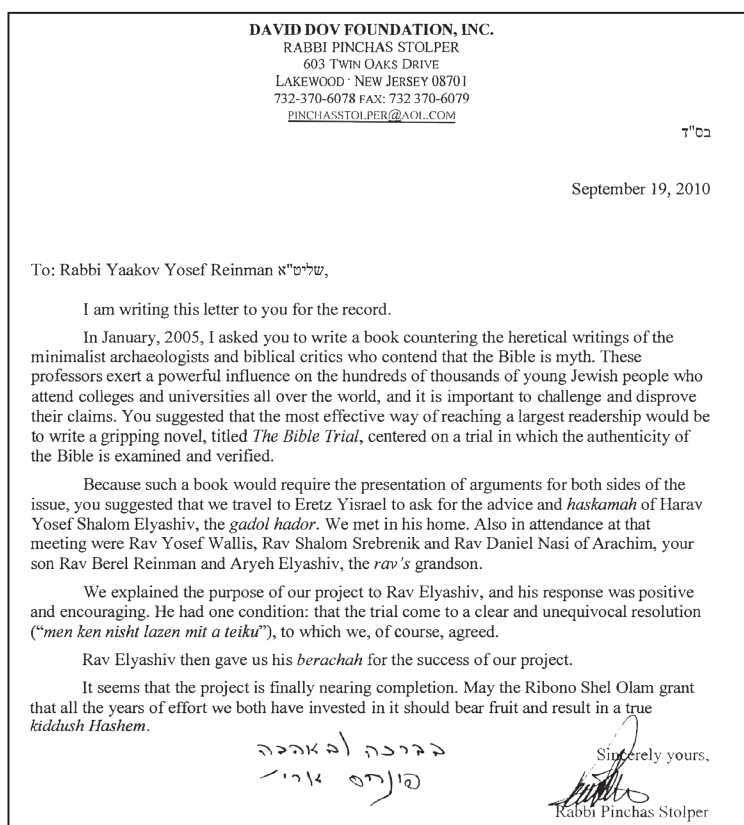
“Because such a book would require the presentation of arguments for both sides of the issue, you suggested that we travel to Eretz Israel to ask for the advice and endorsement of Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, the leading Torah sage of our generation. We met in his home. Also in attendance at that meeting were Rabbi Yosef Wallis, Rabbi Shalom Serebrenik and Rabbi Daniel Nasi of Arachim, your son Rabbi Berel Reinman and Aryeh Elyashiv, the rabbi’s grandson.

“We explained the purpose of our project to Rabbi El-

yashiv, and his response was positive and encouraging. He had one condition: that the trial come to a clean and unequivocal resolution (“men ken nisht lazen mit a teiku”), to which we, of course, agreed. Rabbi Elyashiv then gave us his blessing for the success of our project.

“It seems that the project is finally nearing completion. May the Master of the Universe grant that all the years of effort we both have invested in it should bear fruit and result in a true sanctification of His holy Name.”

A copy of the original letter is attached here. I have to admit that the thought of not having a verdict, as if to say the answer is obvious, did cross my mind, but the rabbi disabused me of it.



My first attempt at the book did not give adequate atten-

tion to the backstory. I had always studied the Bible on its own internal merits, seeking to derive new meaning and interpretations from the nuances of the text and the narrative. But now, I was suddenly deep into the study of the Bible in the context of the external evidence of ancient history and archaeology. Any proficiency with the subject I had gained while writing “One People, Two Worlds” was inadequate for this new project. I put all my efforts into the book and spent most of the next year writing the entire trial without even touching the backstory.

Towards the end of the year, I concocted a story about a teacher who is fired for using the Bible as a historical resource and a lawyer with a dark secret who is blackmailed into taking the case. The story was derivative and mediocre, but no worse than many stories you would find in the library. I also felt it would be important to get an endorsement from a prominent professor in the academic community who supported my view. I decided to approach Dr. Kenneth Kitchen, a leading scholar, whose books featured strongly in the trial.

“I would like to make you an offer that, unfortunately, you can refuse,” I wrote. “The debate regarding the reliability of the Old Testament rages among scholars in the academic community. As far as the general public is concerned, only the most erudite people are informed about the issues involved. Most others are under the impression that science has exposed the Bible as a fraud without any real understanding of why that should be so. How can that impression be combated? Certainly not by more scholarly books.

“I have just completed a novel – it’s actually a bit of a thriller, with murders and mayhem – that incorporates a trial in which the Bible is the de facto defendant. The book has been distributed to a variety of test readers who found it to be a page turner. Most of them also found themselves engrossed in the testimony regarding the Bible, although some readers admitted to skimming but not skipping those parts.

“A certain Dr. Kenneth A. Kitchen figures prominently in the trial. He is described as one of the pre-eminent scholars in the world and his excellent works – *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* and *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* – are quoted extensively. It would be extremely helpful for the project if you would review the book. I would also be honored if you penned a few reasonably complimentary words for the jacket.”

Dr. Kitchen’s gracious response arrived a few weeks later.

“Thank you for your kind and eloquent letter from earlier last month,” he wrote, “with a tempting invitation to read over (and do a ‘blurb’ for) your novel on the Trial of the Scripture. Your enterprise sounds like a useful and stimulating endeavor, and I wish it well. Over the intervening weeks to now, I’ve had to weigh carefully what my response should be. At the end of the day, with all factors considered in the context of how I must live and work, and with great reluctance, I find myself compelled to decline your otherwise tempting invitation. The inescapable fact is that I am not just up to eyes, but well over my head with attempting to cope with existing work that is both physically massive (e.g., front line projects in A-4 format that run from 3 to 7 volumes each in mere length), never mind the intensity of detailed work essential to carrying them through.

“Basic and massive foundations very urgently need to be laid, of a kind that most people (it seems) are too lazy, or too impatient to undertake (or to tiresomely equip themselves to do), and such work then falls to a too-small handful of people like me who are at least prepared to try and fill huge gaps that should have been tackled ages ago – but for which task, the present time offers a maximum of good “raw material” information that can now be used to best effect. Once this is fully marshalled, properly understood and then applied to the background study of the OT/Hebrew Bible, results begin to emerge that are of the first importance in indicating the solid

reality of the latter's contents.

“Thus, I warmly agree with you that we equally need good presentations with a wide and vividly intelligible popular appeal and clean message deriving from the biblical and external facts alike and together: and therefore, I wish every success with your enterprise (“novel” in both senses of the word!). On my part, I have a new-style popular concept in mind, too (not a novel); but it has its place in a queue of work, and must await its appropriate turn (to which I yearn to reach ... but not today ...).”

A copy of his original letter is attached here. It contains much intriguing information about his own, unexplained project for popular consumption. Seventeen years have passed since then, and that project, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet seen the light of day. I hope that someday it will. In any case, although he was very supportive of my project, he simply could not manage.

Nonetheless, I'm not one to take no for an answer so easily. “Thank you for your most gracious letter of January 9,” I wrote back to him. “I deeply appreciate your having given my request such serious consideration, as evidenced by your thinking about it for weeks and responding with such a long and thoughtful letter. As you surely expected, I would not let the matter rest so easily. One of the virtues I admire so much in your work is your tenacity, and I must tell you that I am also tenacious in my own work.

“I recognize that your heavy schedule makes it difficult for you to commit to reading a thriller. Therefore, I would like to suggest another option. The trial itself takes up only a fraction of the whole book. I have stripped it out and saved it as a separate file. I would like to send you this minibook, which you can read over a cup of tea. I think you will find this section serious and scholarly, only the names of the witnesses are fictional. You might even find some illuminating original insights which I have provided from my own biblical studies.

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9th January, 2006.

Dear Mr Reinman,

Thank you for your kind and eloquent letter from earlier last month, with its tempting invitation to read over (and do 'blurb' for) your novel on the 'trial' of Scripture.

Your enterprise sounds like a useful and stimulating endeavour, and I wish it well. Over the intervening weeks to now, I've had to weigh carefully what my response should be. At the end of the day, with all factors considered in the context of how I must live & work, and with great reluctance, I find myself compelled to decline your otherwise tempting invitation. The inescapable fact is that I'm not just up to my eyes, but well over my head with attempting to cope with existing work that is both physically massive (e.g., front-line projects in A-4 format that run from 3 to 7 volumes each in mere length), never mind the intensity of detailed work essential to carrying them through. Basic and massive foundations very urgently need to be laid, of a kind that most people (it seems) are too lazy, or too impatient to undertake (or to tiresomely equip themselves to do), and such work then falls to a too-small handful of people like me who are at least prepared to try & fill huge gaps that should have been tackled ages ago - but for which task, the present time offers a maximum of good "raw material" information that can now be used to best effect. Once this is fully marshalled, properly understood and then applied to the background study of the OT/Hebrew Bible, results begin to emerge that are of the first importance in indicating the solid reality of the latter's contents.

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With every warmest best wish (and for this new year of 2006 (- my! Nearly 1/2 a month's gone already, as I type this!!!), am

Yours sincerely,



Kenneth A. Kitchen

“I have taken the liberty of sending you the manuscripts – the full novel and the excerpted transcript – under separate cover. If you feel that even this is too much for you, you do not even have to open the package. Just drop me a note to that effect. In any case, I wish you the best of luck in all your endeavors. May God bless you and your work.”

Two weeks later, I got my reply. It came with four pages of useful comments and suggestions. In addition, he sent me a blurb for the jacket.

“Very many thanks for your kind and kindly letter of 15th January,” he wrote, “along with the packet (Bible Trial, total text and excerpt) of 17th, all of which I safely received at the Department last Tuesday 24th Jan., just a week ago. At that very busy juncture, I could but read the letter and file it all. To have junked it all would have been an unpardonably rude response – no way! As (for me) Saturdays are separate from the main workdays Mon-Fri, and reserved for alternative tasks to my taste. I took out Sat. 28th between breakfast and evening dinner, just to sit down and quietly go through the full text of The Bible Trial, with ‘air-breaks’ for elevenses, lunch and afternoon tea. A very good and engrossing read!

“I will end any fears you may have as to my reaction. I enjoyed the whole read! That the pre-classical ancient Near East, (outside the Tanakh) is not your habitual haunt makes your achievement here all the more creditable. Congratulations on a good (and strategic) job well-executed. So – I am happy to enclose a ‘blurb’, hopefully that you and the publisher may find acceptable.

“Being me, I made sundry rough-notes as I went along. On Mon and Tues (today), I got these typed off and enclosed these too. I hope you may find these observations of some use; they are intended to remove possible rough edges an opponent might fasten on, and to strengthen your hand (they have no negative intention). Just at one point at least, I would be very grateful that you tone somewhat the fulsome praise

heaped on my bemused old heart (p. 322, lines 11-12 – in the context in which I serve, it is I judge a bit “over the top”, and would be grateful for modification as suggested in my note thereto).

“There are many clearly made points that I especially relish e.g. the clear statement of that most basic fact that NO other book was ever in preclassical antiquity composed by a “scissors & paste” process and J and E items all ‘mixed up’ between documents (when, frequently, they are merely what one may term elegant variation): and the point about the utterly uncritical indoctrination of one generation of students after another down through time from the 1880s until now. (the bad old German habit, when students could only say “mein Professor sagt”, ‘Oh but my Prof. says’, and nothing else counted!). And so much else!

“I have much work to finish because 40 years of compulsory “overreach” in my good and demanding university pushed so much research unhelpfully to one side till I could “retire”. So I must work on quietly until the research-publication ‘mountain’ is cleared up. I can only rarely have assistance, especially as so much has to come out of my own thinking and studying and cannot be farmed out anyway. So, in trust, I just press on quietly, till it shall be done, if the good Lord so wills!”

A copy of the original letter is attached here. In the transcription, I have preserved all Dr. Kitchen’s exclamation points, parentheses, textual idiosyncrasies and British punctuation. I am very grateful that he could not bring himself to toss the package and spent his free time reading the book and writing copious comments.

So now I was all ready to move ahead. I had obtained the blessing of the leading rabbi of our times and the endorsement of the leading orientologist of our times. But finding a publisher turned out to be difficult.

Over the next few years, different agents represented the book, and although a few editors nibbled no one pulled the



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31st January, 2006.

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am

Yours as ever,


Kenneth A. Kitchen

trigger. One editor wrote that the trial was brilliant but not the story, that it was clear where the author's heart lay. She was right. The story did not have its own life. It was there to fill in the gaps of the trial, which is not the way to write a story. It was not organic. The combination of the trial and the back-story was, therefore, incongruous. It was not surprising that it was turned down.

I was encouraged, however, by the comments of some of the secular editors who turned it down. They considered the book fair to both sides. One of them also said he had to admit the book made him think. But he turned it down anyway.

Nonetheless, I did not lose heart. I kept editing and polishing the story, making revisions and additions, but it was all to no avail. Finally, I decided to discard the original back story and write a new story set against a background that I knew intimately. I am a skilled writer of pretty good fiction under the name Avner Gold. So, I put aside the trial and focused entirely on a story about a Jewish family that is deeply affected by events in Hesterville, a town reminiscent of Charlottesville that experiences a white supremacist riot. Then I blended the trial into the second half of the book. I also greatly reduced the volume of the trial that appeared in the story and instead added an appendix featuring the full transcript.

I sent the book to Nancy Rosenberg of AAABooks Unlimited, an agent in the Chicago area who had represented me some years ago. She made a tremendous effort to place the book with a publisher. Under her guidance, I prepared a sixty-page proposal; one editor commented that she had never seen such a complete proposal. We did not, however, get any offers. I think I understand the reasons. I believe Dr. Kitchen hit the nail on the head in his blurb for the jacket which begins, "Here's today's most novel novel . . ." This book is indeed a new kind of novel, a work of popular scholarship in the guise of a thriller, a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction that, although interesting, absorbing and informative, does

not fit comfortably into either genre. Publication of such a book would be a risk, and the publishing industry these days is very risk averse.

After nearly twenty years, I realized I had to find a different route. I was building a website (www.rabbireinman.com) to showcase a series of lectures called “Destiny: A Jewish View of World History,” and I decided to publish “Hesterville” through Shufra Institute, sell it through Amazon and serialize it on the website. Besides the traffic driven to the website by the history series, I also have over 7,000 connections on LinkedIn and many hundreds of correspondents. I will also generate traffic through social media marketing. This is the new world. I believe my book will do fine. Better than fine. I hope you enjoy it.



This book is dedicated to the memory of my good friend and colleague Rabbi Pinchas Stolper. He urged me to write it, helped me with the research and encouraged me at every step of the way. It saddens me that he has not lived to hold a copy in his hands. I will be forever grateful to him. I also want to thank Mrs. Cherna Moskowitz of Miami Beach, Florida, for her enthusiastic support for all of Rabbi Stolper’s projects, including this one.

My thanks to my wonderful agent Nancy Rosenfeld of AAA Books Unlimited, to my editor Dr. Lisa Lipschutz, to my graphic artist Bracha Royde and to my wife, Zvia, my family and all my friends who read the manuscript and offered comments and criticism.

Most of all, I want to express my gratitude to the Almighty for everything He has done for me throughout my life. I hope this book will advance the quest for truth and bring honor to His holy Name.