

# Controversies over the Historicity of Biblical Passages in Traditional Commentary

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## 1. Hullin 90b

R. Ammi said...The Torah spoke in exaggerated terms as in the verse: The cities are great and fortified up to heaven (Deut. 1:28).

חולין צ:

אמר רבי אמאי: דברה תורה לשון הבאי, דברו נביאים לשון הבאי, דברו חכמים לשון הבאי, דברה תורה לשון הבאי: דכתיב (דברים א') ערים גדולות ובצורות בשמים. בשמים ס"ד? אלא - גוזמא...

## 2. Numbers 14:22

None of the men who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and who have tried Me these *eser* times and have disobeyed Me.

במדבר יד:כב

כי כלה אנשים הראים את כבודי ואת אתותי אשר עשיתי במצרים ובמדבר וינסו אתי זה עשר פעמים ולא שמעו בקולי:

## 3. R. Saadyah Gaon, *Emunot ve-De'ot* Book VII

And I so declare, first of all, that it is a well-known fact that every statement in the Bible is to be understood in its literal sense except for those that cannot be so construed for one of the following four reasons: It may, for example, either be rejected by the observation of the senses...Or else the literal sense may be negated by reason...Again [the literal meaning of a biblical statement may be rendered impossible] by an explicit text of a contradictory nature, in which case it would become necessary to interpret the first statement in a non-literal nature...Finally, any biblical statement to the meaning of which rabbinical tradition has attached a certain reservation is to be interpreted by us in keeping with this authentic tradition.

## 4. Rambam, *Treatise on Resurrection*

I believe every possible happening that is supported by a prophetic statement and do not strip it of its plain meaning. I fall back on interpreting a statement only when its literal sense is impossible, like the corporeality of God: the possible however remains as stated.

## 5. R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *The Educational Value of Judaism*, in *Collected Writings*, vol. VII, p. 265

Judaism is not frightened even by the hundreds of thousands and millions of years which the geological theory of the earth's development bandies about so freely...The Rabbis have never made the acceptance or rejection of this and similar possibilities an article of faith binding on all Jews. They were willing to live with any theory that did not reject the basic truth that "every beginning is from God."

6. Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed II:46

God is too exalted than that He should turn His prophets into a laughingstock and a mockery for fools by ordering them to commit acts of disobedience....The position is similar with regard to the words addressed to Hosea: *Take unto thee a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry*. All this story concerning the birth of the children and their having been named so and so happened in its entirety *in a vision of prophecy*. This is a thing that can only be doubted or not known by him who confuses the possible things with the impossible ones.

7. אברבנאל הושע א:א

יש לתמוה מאד מהחכמים המחברים האלה (=אבן עזרא, רמב"ם)--איך נתנו גזירה כוללת כזאת בסיפורי הנביאים? ואם יש לנו פתח פתוח להכחיש פשוטי הספורים ולומר זה היה במראה הנבואה!...?

כי הנה הסימנים והאותות האלה היה ממנהג הנביאים לעשותם תמיד בפעל כדי שיראו בני אדם ויתפעלו מהם--האם נכחישם כולם או נבאר לנו כרצוננו זה אמת וזה שקר?...ומי נתן בידינו הבחירה הזאת אם אין שם אות או מופת יורה עליו הכתוב? ועוד: אם הדברים האלה לא היו נעשים בפעל כי אם בחלום או במראה הנבואה, מה האות והמופת אשר היה עושה בזה לעם?... אם העיד הכתוב שיהיה ונעשה כן בפעל שאז אין לנו לזוז מפשוטו וללא לעשות צורות ולגלות פנים בפסוקים שלא כהלכה... כי הוא באמת זמה ועוון פלילי להכחיש פשוטי הכתובים, ואם כה נעשה להם פשה יתפשה הצרעת בכתובים כולם לגלות בהם פירושים מכחישים אמתתם.  
ואין למפרשים האלה טענה באמרם שהיה מזלזל הקב"ה בכבוד בנביא...כי הנה הנביאים לא נכחדו מה' יתברך מפאת עצמם להעלותם במעלות לכבוד ולתפארת כמלכים, אבל היו שלוחי הקל-לישר את עמו--ולכן היה מצווה אותם לעשות מה שיצטרך לתקונם...

8. Shabbat 56a

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring, for it is said, And David behaved himself wisely in all his ways: and the Lord was with him (I Sam. 18:14). Is it possible that sin came to his hand, yet the Divine Presence was with him?...R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Everyone who went out in the wars of the house of David wrote a bill of divorcement for his wife...

9. Shadal on Genesis 1:1

Intelligent people understand that the goal of the Torah is not to inform us about natural sciences; rather it was given in order to create a straight path for people in the way of righteousness and law, to sustain in their minds the belief in the Unity of God and His Providence.

10. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State, p. 140

If the Holy Scriptures were sources of information, it would be difficult to see where their sacredness resided...The idea that the Shekhinah (God's Presence) descended on Mount Sinai in order to compete with the professor who teaches history or physics is ludicrous, if not blasphemous.

11. Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed 3:22

To sum up: *whether [Job] has existed or not*, with regard to cases like his, which always exist, all reflecting people become perplexed; and in consequence such things as I have already mentioned to you are said about God's knowledge and His providence.