

Origin of Judaism

How Did Judaism Start?



What support is there for the claim that God spoke to all the Jewish people at the foot of Mount Sinai?

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Who did God give the Torah to at Mount Sinai? Most people reply, “God gave the Torah to Moses.”

And what were the Jewish people doing while Moses was receiving the Torah? “Worshipping the Golden Calf.”

Correct answers — but NOT according to the Bible.

The above answers come from Cecil B. DeMille’s classic film, “The Ten Commandments.” Amazing the impact one movie can have on the Jewish education of generations of Jews. It’s a great film, but DeMille should have read the original.

The version found in the Torah is quite different. The Torah’s claim is that the entire people heard God speak at Mount Sinai, experiencing national revelation. God did not just appear to Moses in a private rendezvous; He appeared to everyone, some 3 million people. This claim is mentioned many times in the Torah.

[Moses told the Israelites]: ‘Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld. Do not remove this memory from your heart all the days of your life. Teach your children and your children’s children about the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horev [Mount Sinai]...’

God spoke to you from the midst of the fire, you were hearing the sound of words, but you were not seeing a form, only a sound. He told you of His covenant, instructing you to keep the Ten Commandments, and He inscribed them on two stone tablets.’ (Deut.4:9-13)

‘You have been shown in order to know that God, He is the Supreme Being. There is none besides Him. From heaven he let you hear His voice in order to teach you, and on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words amid the fire.’ (Deut. 4:32-36)

Moses called all of Israel and said to them: ‘Hear, O Israel, the decrees and the ordinances that I speak in your ears today—learn them, and be careful to perform them. The Lord your God sealed a covenant with us at Horev [Mount Sinai]. Not with our forefathers did God seal this covenant, but with us—we who are here, all of us alive today. Face to face did God speak with you on the mountain from amid the fire.’ (Deut. 5:1-4)

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The Torah claims that the entire Jewish nation heard God speak at Sinai, an assertion that has been accepted as part of their nation’s history for over 3,000 years.

DeMille's mistake is such a big deal because the Jewish claim of national revelation, as opposed to individual revelation, is the central defining event that makes Judaism different than every other religion in the world.

How so?

HISTORY AND LEGENDS

Two types of stories are part of any national heritage.

The first kind is legends. Included in this category is George Washington's admission to chopping down the cherry tree, along with his statement, "I can't tell a lie." Johnny Appleseed planting apple trees across America with his discarded apple cores is another legend.

Then there is history. For example, George Washington was the first president of the United States. William the Conqueror led the Battle of Hastings in 1066 in which Harold, King of England, was killed. The Jews of Spain were expelled from their country in 1492, the year Christopher Columbus set sail.

What is the difference between legend and history?

A legend is an unverified story. By their very nature legends are unverifiable because they have very few eyewitnesses. Perhaps little George did chop down the cherry tree. We can't know if it happened. This does not mean that the legend is necessarily false, only that it is unverifiable. No one thinks legends are facts, therefore they are not accepted as reliable history.

History, however, is comprised of events we know actually happened. It is reliable because we can determine if the claimed event is true or false through number of ways. One key to verification is the assertion that large numbers of eyewitnesses observed the specific event.

Why is the number of claimed original witnesses a principal determining factor in making historical accounts reliable? This can be understood through looking at the nature of the following series of claims and weighing their levels of credibility. The nature of the claim itself can often determine its degree of believability.

THE BELIEVABILITY GAME

Gauge the level of credibility of the following scenarios.

Some claims are inherently unverifiable. For example, would you believe me if I told you the following:

Scenario #1:

"Last week after dinner, I went for a walk through the forest near my house. Suddenly everything was awash in a tremendous light and God appeared to me, designating me as His prophet. He told me to announce this revelation to you at this time."

Believable?

In theory this could have happened. It doesn't seem likely, but you don't know I'm lying. Would you choose to believe me?

Without any substantiating evidence, why choose to believe me? A foolish move, indeed.

Scenario #2:

Would you believe me if I told you the following:

"Last night while I was eating dinner with my family, the room started to suddenly shake and God's booming voice was heard by all of us. He designated me as His prophet and commanded me to announce this revelation."

Believable?

This could have happened too. If I were to bring in my family to confirm the story it would be more believable than the first story. You certainly don't know I'm lying.

Would you believe me? Would you fork over \$10,000 dollars if I told you God commanded you to do so?

No way. There is still not enough evidence to trust my claim—because it is very possible that my family is lying.

Scenario #3:

There is another type of claim that you can know is false. For example, would you believe me if I told you this:

“Do you remember what happened 10 minutes ago just as you began reading this article? Remember how the room started shaking, then the ceiling opened up to the skies, and you and I together heard God’s booming voice come down and say ‘Thou shalt hearken to the voice of Nechemia Coopersmith for he is my prophet!’ And then the room went back to normal and you continued reading. You remember that, don’t you?”

Is this believable?

This kind of claim is completely different. The two previous scenarios at least had the possibility of being true. You chose not to accept them because they were unverifiable. However this third scenario is impossible to believe. I’m claiming something happened to you that you know did not happen. Since you didn’t experience it, you know I’m lying. I cannot convince you of something that you yourself know didn’t happen.

This first type of claim—that something happened to someone else—is unverifiable, because you do not know for certain that the claim is a lie. Therefore is possible for a person to decide to accept the claim as true if he really wanted to and take that leap of faith.

However, the other type of claim—that something happened to you—you know if it is inherently false. People do not accept patently false assertions, especially those that carry significant consequences.

SINAI: AN IMPOSSIBLE HOAX

So far we have seen two types of claims—one is unverifiable and the other is inherently false.

Could the revelation at Sinai have been a brilliant hoax, duping millions of people into believing that God spoke to them?

Let’s imagine the scene. Moses comes down the mountain and claims, “We all today heard God speak, all of you heard the God’s voice from the fire...”

Assuming Moses is making it up, how would the people respond to his story?

“Moses! What are you talking about?! Boy, you sure had us going there for awhile. We may have even believed you if you came down and claimed that God appeared to you personally. But now you blew it! Now we know you’re lying because you’re claiming an event happened to us that we know didn’t happen! We did not hear God speak to us from any fire!”

If the revelation at Sinai did not occur, then Moses is claiming an event everyone immediately knows is an outright lie, since they know that they never heard God speak. It is preposterous to think Moses can get away with a claim that everyone knows is lie.

REVELATION CLAIMED LATER IN HISTORY

Perhaps a hoax such as this could have been attempted at a later period in history. Perhaps the claim of national revelation did not originate at Sinai, but began, for example, 1,000 years after the event was said to have occurred. Perhaps the leader Ezra, for example, appears on the scene, introducing a book purported to be written by God and given to a people who stood at Sinai a long time ago.

Could someone get away with this kind of hoax? For example, would you believe the following:

“I want to let you in on a very little-known, but true fact. In 1794 over 200 years ago, from May until August, the entire continent of North America mysteriously sank under the sea. For those four months, the whole continent was submerged and somehow all animal, plant and human life managed to adapt to these bizarre conditions. Then, on August 31, the entire continent suddenly floated up to the surface and life resumed to normal.”

Is there a possibility that I'm telling the truth? Do you know for a fact that it is a lie? After all, it happened so long ago, how do you know it didn't happen? Maybe you learned about in school and just forgot about it.

You know North America did not sink hundreds of years ago for one simple reason: If it did, you would have heard about it. An event so unique and amazing, witnessed by multitudes of people would have been known, discussed, and passed down, becoming a part of history. The fact that no one has heard of it up until now means you know the story is not true, making it impossible to accept.

An event of great significance with a large number of eyewitnesses cannot be perpetuated as a hoax. If it did not happen, everyone would realize it is false since no one ever heard about it before. Thus, if such an event was indeed accepted as part of history, the only way to understand its acceptance is that the event actually happened.

INTRODUCED LATER?

Let's assume for the moment that the revelation at Mount Sinai is really a hoax; God did not write the Torah. How did the revelation at Sinai become accepted for thousands of years as part of our nation's history?

Imagine someone trying to pull off such a hoax. An Ezra figure shows up one day holding a scroll.

"Hey Ezra – what are you holding there?"

"This is the Torah."

"The Torah? What's that?"

"It's an amazing book filled with laws, history and stories. Here, take a look at it."

Very nice, Ezra. Where did you get this?"

"Open up the book and see what it says. This book was given thousands of years ago to your ancestors. Three million of them stood at Mount Sinai and heard God speak! God appeared to everyone, giving His law and instruction."

How would you respond to such a claim?

The people give Ezra a quizzical look and say,

"Wait a second, Ezra. Something is a little fishy here. Why haven't we ever heard of this before? You're describing one of the most momentous events that could ever happen, claiming that it happened to our ancestors – and we never heard about it?"

"Sure. It was along time ago. Of course you never heard about it."

"C'mon Ezra! It's impossible that our grandparents or great-grandparents would not have passed down the most significant event in our nation's history to some of the people! How could it be that no one has heard about this up until now?! You're claiming all my ancestors, the entire nation, 3 million people heard God speak and received a set of instructions called the Torah, and none of us have heard about it?! You must be lying."

If one cannot pull off a hoax with regard to a continent sinking, so too one cannot pull off a hoax to convince an entire people that their ancestors experienced the most unique event in all of human history.

Everyone would know it's a lie.

For thousands of years, Sinai was accepted as central to Jewish history. How else can this be explained?

Given that people will not fall for a hoax they know is a lie, how could national revelation have been not only accepted—but faithfully followed with great sacrifice by the vast majority of Jews?

The only way a people would accept such a claim is if it really happened. If Sinai did not happen, everyone would know it's a lie and it would never have been accepted. The only way one can ever claim a nation experienced revelation and have it accepted is if it is true.

SINAI: THE ONLY CLAIM OF NATIONAL REVELATION

Throughout history, tens of thousands of religions have been started by individuals, attempting to convince people that God spoke to him or her. All religio

that base themselves on some type of revelation share essentially the same beginning: a holy person goes into solitude, comes back to his people, and announces that he has experienced a personal revelation where God appointed him to be His prophet.

Would you believe someone who claims to have received a personal communication from God appointing him or her as God's new prophet?

Maybe He did. Then again, maybe He didn't. One can never know. The claim is inherently unverifiable.

Personal revelation is an extremely weak basis for a religion since one can never know if it is indeed true. Even if the individual claiming personal revelation performs miracles, there is still no verification that he is a genuine prophet. Miracles do not prove anything. All they show—assuming they are genuine—is that he has certain powers. It has nothing to do with his claim of prophecy.

Maimonides writes:

Israel did not believe in Moses, our teacher, on account of the miracles he performed. For when one's faith is based on miracles, doubt remains in the mind that these miracles may have been done through the occult and witchcraft...

What then were the grounds of believing him? The revelation on Sinai which we saw with our own eyes, and heard with our own ears, not having to depend on the testimony of others... (Mishna Torah - Foundations of Torah 8:1)

A BOLD PREDICTION

There are 15,000 known religions in all of recorded history. Given this inherent weakness, why do all of them base their claim on personal revelation? If someone wanted their religion to be accepted, why wouldn't they present the strongest, most believable claim possible—i.e. national revelation! It's far more credible. No one has to take a leap of faith and blindly trust just one person's word. It is qualitatively better to claim that God came to everyone, telling the entire group that so-and-so is His prophet.

Why would God establish His entire relationship with a nation through one man, without any possibility of verification, and still expect this nation to obediently follow an entire system of instructions, based only on blind faith?

Yet, Judaism is the only religion in the annals of history that makes the best of all claims—that everyone heard God speak. No other religion claims the experience of national revelation. Why?

Furthermore, the author of the Torah predicts that there will never be another claim of national revelation throughout history!

'You might inquire about times long past, from the day that God created man on earth, and from one end of heaven to the other: Has there ever been anything like this great thing or has anything like it been heard? Has a people ever heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fires as you have heard and survived?' (Deut. 4:32-33)

Let's consider the option that God did not write the Torah, and its author successfully convinced a group of people to accept a false claim of national revelation. In this book, the author writes a prediction that over the course of history no one will ever make a similar claim. That means if such a claim is ever made at some future time, the prediction will end up being false and his religion is finished.

How could the author include in the book he is passing off as a hoax the prediction that no other person will ever attempt to perpetuate the same hoax which he just made that exact claim? If he could do it, he can be certain that others will too, especially since it is the best possible claim to make. If you are making up a religion, you do not write something you know you cannot predict and whose outcome you would think is guaranteed to be exactly the opposite.

However, aside from the Jewish claim of Mount Sinai, it is a fact that no other nation has ever claimed such a similar national revelation.

Let's summarize two primary questions:

1. Out of 15,000 known religions in recorded history, why is Judaism the only one that claims national revelation, the best of all claims? Why do all other religions base themselves on the inherently weak assertion of personal revelation?
2. If Judaism's claim is indeed an example of a successful hoax that falsely asserts national revelation, the author just got away with passing off the best possible claim, and others will certainly follow suit. Why then would he predict that no one else will ever make a similar claim, a prediction he knows he

cannot foresee, and whose outcome is likely to be the exact opposite?

There is one simple answer to both questions. A national revelation—as opposed to personal revelation—is the one lie you cannot get away with. It is one event you cannot fabricate. The only way to make this claim is if it actually happened.

If the claim is true, the people will believe it because they are agreeing to something they already know. Either they personally witnessed it, or their ancestors collectively passed down the account as part of their nation's accepted history.

If the claim is false, it's like trying to convince you that God spoke to you or your parents and somehow you never heard of it. No one would ever accept such a claim.

Therefore no other religion has ever made the best of all claims, because it is the one claim that can only be made if it is true. One cannot pass national revelation off as a hoax.

When inventing a religion, the originator must resort to personal revelation, despite its inherent weakness, since it is a claim that is unverifiable. The originator can hope to find adherents willing to take a leap of faith and accept his or her religion. After all, no one can ever know it is a lie. [Of course, no one can know if it's true either.] This simply cannot work with national revelation since it's the one claim that everyone will know is a lie.

Only Judaism can claim national revelation since the Jewish people is the only nation in the history of mankind who ever experienced it.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the other major religions of the world both accept the Jewish revelation at Sinai, including the Five Books of Moses in their Bible, and hold the Sinai revelation as a key component of their religion.

When starting their own religions, why did they build upon the Jewish claim? Why didn't they just deny the revelation ever happened?

The answer is that they knew that if national revelation can never be fabricated; so too, its validity can therefore never be denied.

Now it is understandable how the Author of the Torah can confidently predict that there will never be another claim of national revelation in history.

Because only God knew it would happen only once, as it did—at Sinai over 3,000 years ago.

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by [Rabbi Nechemia Cooper Smith](#)

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