

A Discussion about the Noahide Laws

between Peter van 't Riet en Michel Canter

From the 24th of November 2021 until the 6th of February 2022, we had an e-mail discussion about the Noahide Laws, and by association, about many more subjects. We knew each other from the synagogue in the Dutch town of Zwolle where we met as non-Jewish visitors. And although our contacts never were very close, we started an extensive exchange of ideas in the autumn of 2021. After some mails in Dutch about the way we would have the discussion (because of the Corona pandemic we couldn't meet physically), on the 27th of November it started in English. Below you'll find the text of our conversation which, maybe, will be interesting for you.

27 November 2021

Hallo Peter,

Thanks for your mail. I would have preferred a discussion (in Dutch) but due to the circumstances you point out let me try to formulate some written questions - in English - otherwise I'll be spending half my time trying to correct my Dutch grammatical mistakes!

I would like to start by sketching a background situation with some rhetorical questions. Hopefully I can keep on a track that will enable you to answer the questions I have concerning Adam and Eve and Noah. I will pose these questions later.

Is there a god or gods? No - end of exercise. Yes - which god or gods from the many? To simplify matters let us for the moment randomly choose the God of Torah and Tanakh. Was the world created as described in those books or did evolution form the world? Let us choose the former for the purpose of this conversation.

In the books mentioned above reference is made to persons named Adam and Eve. Were they literal creations of God whose genealogies are given or were they a sort of archetype of all mankind perhaps from the Palaeolithic period? If the former, were they given instructions or a code by God on how to live or were they left to figure things out themselves (as in the evolution model?) If the former, what were these instructions? According to some (Jewish) sources the instructions given to Adam and Eve included some (six?) of those later revealed to Noah after the Flood, i.e. the Noahide laws (seven?) Also, according to Torah God later revealed additional instructions/laws/words (ten?) to Moses as a leader of His chosen people. It seems then that a pattern of important Godly revelations was made to these persons.

Peter, before I continue to actually ask my questions, may I enquire if you can accord with anything/something/nothing I have written above? I'm sure you will agree that it is pointless to continue if discrepancies in viewpoints are too extreme. It would be like me trying to explain the Bhagavad Gita with hours and hours of writing only to receive a short reply, 'No, I don't believe it.' I would prefer to avoid such a situation! (i.e. not your belief but rather all my work for nothing).

Michel

p.s. Some or any of the above is not necessarily a reflection of my personal beliefs.

29 November 2021

Hello Michel,

I've no problem with your rhetorical questions and answers with one exception. That's your first answer on your first question. Even if there wasn't a god or weren't any gods at all it could be useful in my eyes to discuss Bible stories and to ask oneself what could be learned of it. A god or no god existing, people will always be confronted with ethical and moral questions. The Bible is eminently a book dealing with those questions, isn't it. The problem whether God exists or doesn't exist, is not so important for me although I believe in His existence (whatever is meant with that). But I always think about a Jewish-American joke that reads as follows.

An atheistic Jewish father in New York found for his twelve-year-old son an excellent secondary school: Trinity College. After his first day at school the son came home flabbergasted and asked his father: 'Dad, do you know what Trinity means?' His father thought for a while and said: 'Well, tell me.' 'Trinity means God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit!' His father thought again for a while and answered then: 'Well, son, there is only one God, and we don't believe in Him!'

So, I think we could discuss the Bible stories without answering these philosophical existence questions, couldn't we.

May I finish this mail with a question? How important is the historical reliability of Bible stories to you? Do you think it necessary for the truth of the stories that the reported events happened exactly in that way? Or could you agree with a loosely connection between the stories and historical developments? Or could you even live with Bible stories which were pure fiction? Don't fear to give your true answer. I never prescribe someone my own opinions.

Yours,

Peter

29 November 2021

Peter,

Ha, ha, thanks for the joke but now I will try to answer that my way.

Okay, so to get back to the god/no god question. As you know, there are all types and varieties of these 'entities/beings/whatever'. I think that in our part of the world God is generally thought of as an intelligent and mighty creator god with many 'good' attributes

such as being loving, merciful, just etc. My personal belief about 'His' existence at this stage of my life is I doubt it. On the other hand, if there is no god then where did everything come from? Even if from specks of dust but how did *they* come to be? So, the doubt always remains. The truth is - I don't know. Thus, I am classed as an agnostic.

But if there is no god to give us our morals/ethics, then where do we get them from? I don't think the Bible (or any other religious book) is necessary but that all groups develop their own rules over time. Generally, this is done by agreement but imposing one's rules on subjugated groups can also occur. What is accepted by some groups may be wholly or partly accepted or rejected by others. For example, cannibals find eating humans fine, but most other groups disagree. Of course, religious books/beliefs can also contribute to the development of ethical rules as can philosophical works.

You ask how important the historical reliability of Bible stories is to me. I think this is an important question and is exactly the reason WHY I wanted to ask you my questions regarding Adam & Eve and Noah. Now, a lot can be said over the Bible and of course has been. One particularly interesting book I once read was *The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible* by Robin Lane Fox.

I see the Bible as a number of diverse but mainly religious legends, sayings and writings collected and later redacted. The historical writings are generally true but certainly not comprehensive nor unbiased. I do not see the Bible as 'God's Word' and infallible. Despite my personal views regarding the Bible, still I would like to ask you my questions AS THOUGH the Bible is God's Word. The reason I want to do this is because I think (but I'm not sure) that you DO believe in the Bible as God's word and revelation to man and in the literal truth of the events contained therein. Please correct me if I am wrong!

Regards, Michel

1 December 2021

Hello Michel,

I accept all your doubts. They are no reason for me not to have a discussion with you about Bible stories. My personal view is not quite the same as you wrote it in the last paragraph of your last mail. I believe in the Bible as God's word and revelation to man, but not in the literal truth of the events contained therein. Revelation is in my eyes not a simple issue of the Holy Spirit who as a dove on the shoulder of the Bible writer whispered his message into his ear. I think it's a much more complex process of thinking, doing, studying, discussing, storytelling, writing, reading, doing again, anew discussing, rewriting and finally establishing texts and rituals by a tradition minded group of people called 'Israel', i.e. the Jewish people. My believe in God is based on the history of Israel from Biblical times until today. It's a centuries lasting process of learning and trying out. For me, Bible stories are more than pure legend. They are narrative theology, philosophy of live, laid down in a figurative language with abstract principles underling it. So, it's not necessary at all that Adam and Eva would

have existed historically. They are moral-theological models by which we can learn for life. So, please, start your questions about them and we'll see where we end up.

With best regards,
Peter

1 December 2021

Hallo again Peter,

Let me say straight away that I am finding it very difficult to understand your interpretation of what the Bible is. If we cannot rely on what is written in the Bible as being a true reflection of the events described therein then how on earth can we take it seriously as a guide for ourselves? Surely one cannot see everything written as just a number of parables or visions or whatever that we can just interpret as we like in order to formulate a tailored explanation of how we can fit our lives to accommodate them?

Let me give an example. In many places in the Bible genealogies are provided for the person or persons being talked about. It seems that many of these people were actual historical persons. The question then arises: why are we being given this (often detailed) information? Can we use it for serious historical research? Or is it just the imaginary concoctions of a sincere but nevertheless deluded author or authors?

Peter, I can give more examples and pose more questions but perhaps you can understand what I mean. Obviously, there *are* parables and abstract truths to be learned from the Bible but usually these are indicated or can clearly be deduced as such. I am talking more about people, events and places described in the Bible.

I regret to say that it is not possible for me to pose my original questions until we can clear these issues first. If you feel that I am procrastinating, then I apologise and am prepared to close this discussion albeit regretfully. I will leave the decision in your hands.

Sincerely,
Michel

3 December 2021

Hello Michel,

To start with your last remark, my hands tell me to continue our discussion. It forces me to formulate my views more precisely. When you would like to stop with it, feel free whenever you want.

Let me first answer your remarks about 'what the Bible is'. My belief in God isn't a belief in an arbitrary god. I don't believe in a "there will be something in the universe". I only believe

in a specific God, the God of the people of Israel. Jews get to know him as a child not from the Bible, but generally from their parents and ancestors. That's why genealogies are so important in many Bible stories, written when there was no Bible at all. Also, we as non-Jews have gotten to know this God from the Jewish people albeit maybe via the detour of Christianity. In my view true knowledge about this God is only possible by engaging with the people of Israel, which is today the Jewish people. Also, the Bible can't be really understood when not approached in a Jewish way. It's also thanks to them that we have it. All the books of the Bible were written by Jewish authors (which is even true for the New Testament) and the Tanakh is compounded by Jewish Rabbis at the end of the 1st century. The stories weren't written in a standardized Hebrew sent from heaven, but in the vernacular, vocabulary, grammar, and idiom of the writer's time. How did these writers work?

Bible stories about historical events are reflections of the wrestling God and Israel are going through history. They aren't factual historical reports, but moral-theological reflections from which future generations can learn for life. In these stories historical facts are subordinated to the moral arguments in which the standards of the Torah play an important part in a positive or negative way. And yes, the things to learn are not only communal but often also very personal. There is a nice statement in the Rabbinic literature that every Hebrew word of the Bible has 70 different meanings, and all are good to God. For people who think this would be the end of truth, I always add: not 71! But it's a common accepted view in Jewish circles that everyone should live with his own personal acceptance of the Torah.

My second remark concerns your statement: "It seems that many of these people were actual historical persons." That's certainly true. David and his descendants were historical figures, absolutely. But the story tellers weren't very interested in factual history as we are today. As I argued above, they told history as a moral lesson for later generations. So, using the Bible stories for scientific-historical research should be done very carefully and reservedly. Archaeological findings often tell another story. In my opinion science reveals in the end the creation as God has made it. We must take it seriously. When science tells us a completely different story about the coming into existence of the earth, why should we hold on to the historicity of the Creation story? The Creation story is narrative theology. It explains not how the world came into being, but why it came into being and how we should interpret the natural phenomena surrounding us.

May I, at the end of this mail, ask you a question? It seems to me that you attach great importance to the exactly historical reliability of the Bible stories. But in your mail of the 29th of November, you acknowledged your doubts about the existence of God. How could Bible stories be historical reliable if the leading actor, i.e. God, would not exist?

In the meanwhile, you made me very curious to the questions about Adam, Eve and Noah you've postponed asking.

Yours,
Peter

4 December 2021

Hi Peter,

We have written backwards and forwards lately. I am not a writer by trade, but I will attempt a summary anyway. And conclude with my questions.

For many generations the Bible was seen as God's word. You will have heard of the 3 I's of old: Inspired, Inerrant, Infallible. See Paul at 2 Tim. 3:16. And recall how the Israelites not only wrote that God said so and so but expressly quoted Him. God said, "So and so." And if He actually said something then it goes without saying that it must be true - God would not deceive us! Or again, when Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." His very words! Then it was no wonder that people believed that the Bible was a book that could be relied upon from cover to cover. A perfect book given by the perfect God of Israel for the benefit of mankind.

Later of course the Bible critics came who questioned the factual accuracy of the various claims made in the Bible and the moral tenability of the commandments. And other aspects of biblical writings. Genealogies were examined and divided into their various classes (ethnonyms, toponyms, linear, and goodness knows what other kinds). Doubt crept in concerning God's authorship.

So, the Bible, a most interesting collection of books, a mosaic of differing genres but also containing errors was gradually shown to be rather of human signature than of godly. Many claims made in some of these books could not be authenticated; others seem to be a mixture of authentic history and myth. Yet others seem wholly true. And, as you say, science came to play a role with the development of the evolution theory, carbon dating etc. which also called into question some of the biblical explanations.

My questions to you are simply these: How do you see the Jewish/Israelitish explanation of the (7) Noahide Laws as described in the Tosefta, Talmud and the Bible? And in extension to that, the laws given to Adam and Eve? Were the Godly revelations of how He wanted His creation to live a true event or a weak attempt at explaining a mythical occurrence? For that matter, can I ask the same question concerning the revelation to Moses of the 10 Words/Laws/ Commandments? Was this an event witnessed by many as described or a fantasy?

Regards,
Michel

p.s. In answer to your last question to me: Even if God does not exist, still the religious writings of a people (any people) can be true, false (intentionally or not) or partly true and partly false. And therefore, interesting to anyone concerned with the study of history.

7 December 2021

Hello Michel,

Your first paragraph is correct: that was for generations the view upon the Bible, certainly in Christian circles. It is ultimately an apocalyptic view: God had written the books of the Bible in heaven and the so-called Bible writers had gotten a look in His mysterious world after which they were mainly mediators to get the books on earth in a written form. But I don't think the Bible writers have seen this like that, except the Apocalypics among them. Also, modern Bible sciences tell us another story as you correctly expounded. In my eyes however this will not mean the Bible isn't a product of divine revelation. Probably the definition of divine revelation usual in Christianity has been too simple. It was/is a concept in which the people of Israel don't play a significant part. They only were a device by which the revelation could reach mankind. Just like in the apocalyptic literature the prophets themselves didn't understand the meaning of their messages. Only the later apocalypics were able to encipher them. But in my view, there is no divine revelation outside the religious activity of Israel/the Jewish people. And that religious activity is: wrestling with God, just what the name 'Israel' means.

Against this background it's indeed important for us, non-Jews, to ask what the Jewish view on the Noahide Laws is as described in the rabbinic literature. Let me first make the remark that I'm not a specialist in this matter. So, my view is based on a limited amount of information about it and if you know more or other things of it, then bring them in.

Firstly, not all the Noahide laws are explicitly formulated as such in the Bible. Yes, some are in Genesis 9, but others are elsewhere given only for Jews. Torah is mainly a charter for Israelite/Jewish individuals and communities, much less for gentiles. However, in all places where Israelite communities came into existence, they came across the issue how to deal with non-Jewish people in their midst. What kind of conduct rules could be asked of them? And so, the Noahide laws emerged over centuries. In the first centuries CE they weren't yet crystallized, neither was their number, and even the Rabbinic literature isn't unanimous about them. From that time on they were also linked up by word association (*gêzarah sjawah*) with the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:16), if not mentioned in the story of Noah (Genesis 9:1-7).

Secondly, could they be seen as part of the divine revelation? Yes, in a certain sense. If we accept that God is only knowable by the way Israel has lived with Him for centuries with all ups and down, then the Noahide laws are the result of that process in which God played an important part guiding His people. This is also true for the Ten Words of Moses on Sinai. Their meanings are the true revelation. The literary form in which they were laid down to transfer them to next generations is mainly important because of its narrative theology, much less because of its historical reliability in the modern sense of the word. Therefore, your contradiction between "an [historical] event witnessed by many as described or a fantasy" doesn't exist in my view. There is a way between these extremes: the way the Jewish people goes wrestling with God through history and having laid down their experiences in their literature. This way delivers reliable wisdom to investigate critically before integrating it in our own lives in our own ways.

Your P.S. is certainly true, but no historian today will uncritically take over described events from religious sources, if only because modern science of history has a view on historical facts that didn't exist in Antiquity.

Regards,

Peter

7 December 2021

Peter,

Thanks for your latest mail. When I read it, a picture begins to form of your belief view. I will attempt to briefly outline it. Where I have misunderstood your stance, you are at liberty to sternly correct me! Of course, I know what my belief view is (at present). The only thing of interest, at least to me, is to compare both and try to determine if and where they converge or diverge.

View of P.:

There exists a God who created the universe including our world and its inhabitants. This happened a long time ago, perhaps through the means of evolution. Some stories in the Bible are to teach us and should not be taken literally e.g. the creation of Adam & Eve in Paradise and the Flood. Similarly other parts of the Bible whether poetic, historic, prophetic or wisdom literature were all written for the same purpose. They all reflect the strugglings and wrestlings of God with His chosen people. It is by this mechanism that we are able to understand the will of God and His purpose with us.

View of M.:

The existence of a single god or many gods is unclear, even doubtful. The origin of the universe and life is also unclear. Perhaps the Big Bang? Even then, questions remain. The religious beliefs developed over time by different peoples in different locations came into being as a result of their own attempts to explain the phenomena they experienced around them like lightning, floods, earthquakes etc. Also, their natural inquisitiveness as to their existence played a role. Similarly, their morals and laws were agreed amongst themselves or in some cases imposed on them by a stronger group. As man-made constructions they are subject to change.

Peter, something that interests me is *why* you have chosen the God of Abraham and His chosen people to base your own beliefs upon? Was the great creator God Brahma not a contender? Or Chebbeniathan? Or any number of other alternatives? Perhaps, just as there are Anglophiles and Francophiles, you just happen to be an "Israeliteophile"?

In order to keep our discussion clarifying, I will end here even though I still have a question and/or comment regarding your view of the Noahide Laws.

Regards Michel

10 December 2021

Hello Michel,

I think your summary of the intellectual side of my faith is exactly as I see it at this moment. With respect to your question at the end of your mail, my answer is as follows.

I haven't chosen the God of Israel because He is an almighty creator God, but because He is a humane God who involves human beings to accomplish his creation. And this accomplishment is mainly about the creation of righteous and peaceful societies for all people on earth, to start with the people of Israel. And that's a long-term process guided by Torah and Jewish tradition that is far from complete.

May I ask you a personal question too? I often saw you in the synagogue of Zwolle during the services, but we never talked with each other very much. By personal circumstances I don't visit the synagogue very often anymore. So, I don't know whether it's still your custom now-a-days. But why did or do you visit these synagogue services so frequently being an agnostic? That seems an intriguing question to me.

Yours,

Peter

12 December 2021

Hallo Peter,

Thanks for your reply. In this mail I will attempt to oversee how your view-point fits into the God plan. My visualisation may come over as a bit childish but I find some of the stories in the Bible also rather childish so we should cancel out as far as that is concerned. So here goes:

The Plan

The Eternal God was sitting on His throne and on a fine day – figuratively speaking – when He decided to create the universe in order to develop a Plan. Planet Earth was chosen to put this Plan in action. The idea was to make a world of beings that could live peacefully and happily with each other. To make His Plan more challenging God decided to give the beings a free-will so that they could go about their business without merely being His robots.

Unfortunately, the Plan soon began to go wrong after God created the first beings. In a short time, things went from bad to worse and people were committing all manner of serious crimes. This so infuriated God that He decided to drown everyone and everything except one righteous family (and the lucky marine creatures which could survive under water). It is not clear why He drowned them unless for revenge. If it was for punishment, then that did not work because once again people were soon sinning and doing bad things. Perhaps it was just to give His creation another chance but whatever the reason He determined never again to become so infuriated whatever happened in the future.

Much to God's sorrow mankind after the Flood still did not improve but continued in their stubborn ways. God decided to again modify His Plan so that it *would* succeed. His idea now was to select a tribe which He could teach to become peaceful, happy and as holy as He was. Once this was accomplished then they would become an example to the rest of mankind of how they too could also live in peace and happiness.

The disappointment for God was great when also this did not work as He had expected. Admittedly His chosen people did try to implement this new plan but instead of growing to be a great exemplary and numerous nation they began bickering amongst themselves and also with other nations around them. As a result, their power and influence gradually diminished until finally only a tiny remnant of them remained.

[This paragraph is for the Christians; non-Christians can skip to the next paragraph]. Again, for the third time, God was forced to revise His Plan which He was still determined to let succeed. This time He decided to father a Son so that His godly influence could directly be brought to bear upon the unhappy and disorderly peoples everywhere. He would show them in this familial way that He was a loving and humane God and that this was precisely what He desired for His creation. Unbelievably yet again, the majority of peoples and nations revolted against Him and His Son and His Plan.

Though God was again becoming increasingly exasperated, yet He constrained Himself when He remembered that He had promised not to become so angry and destroy His creation a second time. So once more He came up with another idea that He revealed through the tiny remnant of His chosen people that still remained faithful to Him. This idea, this final touch, will ensure that His original Plan will succeed. He will send a special Messiah who through his supernatural godly powers will finally succeed in persuading people to live in peace and harmony. Any who refuse to comply will not be allowed to thwart God's Plan any longer – they will be banished. Finally, the Earthlings will be happy and God will be too!

In answer to your question: it is a long story how I came to attend shul services. For now, let me skip that part and just say this: Firstly, shul services are an opportunity to gather socially. (I knew Sh.M. from before I came to live in Zwolle). Persons of all persuasions attend especially when there is only one stream to choose from – in this case the (special Zwolle version of the) orthodox stream. I came to know from deeply religious to atheists amongst those attending. A second reason is that services present an opportunity to partake in and uphold an ancient and on-going tradition. Thirdly, the services also presented an opportunity to practice my reading if not understanding of Hebrew. I was proud to do that even though some readers went extremely fast. Which was also necessary otherwise the long services

would have been even longer! But the kiddush, coffee and joint singing made it all worthwhile at the end.

I will admit that my views regarding religion did undergo their greatest change in the period that I attended services in Zwolle. I think the biggest influences on my thinking were the books *Religion in Ancient History* by S.G.F. Brandon which describes how religions originate and develop and *The end of faith* by Sam Harris which shows why the god-idea is unrealistic (in his view). They reinforced any doubts that I already had.

Regards, Michel

17 December 2021

Hello Michel,

Your story about the Plan of God could be told by Metatron, the angel after God's throne, who saw all His activities and heard all His deliberations. Unfortunately, this is not my view on Him. There is a nice rabbinic saying about the form of the letter Bet in the Hebrew alphabet: Why does the Torah begin with the letter Beth? To learn you not to look backwards, nor upwards or downwards, but to look forwards to what's written in the Torah for you. That's what I try to do and therefore I needn't speculations about God's existence or His plan. In the Bible He is the self-evident main character. Whether or not you believe in His existence you could learn Torah.

The motivation with which you follow the services in the synagogue, I do recognize. For years my own motivation was rather equal. Also, to support the continued existence of the building and thereby of the Jewish Community of Zwolle although I never counted in for the minyan.

The book of Brandon I have in my library in a Dutch translation. Maybe I'll read it shortly.

But for now, let's try to return to the reason we started this e-mail conversation. You wanted to discuss some questions about the stories of Adam, Eve and Noah. Could we focus on that again?

Yours,
Peter

17 December 2021

Hi Peter,

I don't agree with the rabbis about Beth. I think it is very important to look back because that is the only way to know where we came from and how we got here where we are now today - hopefully I won't be turned into a pillar of salt for looking back!

The Plan story is what I understand when I read the Bible. Nothing in my story is made up by me but only a summary of what I read there.

The reason why I wanted to talk/write to you is because I was puzzled by you. I can understand atheists, agnostics, Jews, Christians, diverse philosophies, other religions, the indifferent and even the apathetic. But I could not place you in any of these groups. It seems you are a God-fearing person who accepts the teachings of the Jews but does not wish to join with them formally, i.e. convert. That leaves you in a position where you are at liberty to pick and choose from their religious system what you will and ignore the rest! Of course, you are perfectly free to do this just as you are to adopt any life-style you want because of your free-will. However, if you desire to participate in the world-to-come, the Jews themselves would classify you as a Noahide and expect you to live according to their teachings regarding the Noahide laws. The alternative would be to convert and to live according to their special Jewish laws.

This is the Jewish standpoint for everyone on earth, all being the offspring of Noah. This being the case, it is totally unnecessary for *anyone* to follow any other teaching or religion except the Noahide laws to be happy in the knowledge that they will gain admittance in the world-to-come and be at one with their God Who ordained those laws.

So, Peter, do not see my comments as criticism of your chosen path - as I said, you are free to do as you wish. It just seems to me that IF one believes in God (more specifically the God Elohim or Jahwe) then it seems equally logical to want to please Him by following the simple requirements He ordained in His 7 laws. Everything else is superfluous!

Regards,
Michel

21 December 2021

Hello Michel,

In my view the rabbis were wise men who knew that there are no religious answers on backwards, upwards and downwards questions, but there are many answers on forwards questions. If you search for answers on backwards questions, you could better turn to science, not to the Bible. Unfortunately, there are also different schools of science with different theories. But, if you search for answers on forwards questions, the Bible could be a useful book for us.

Your Plan story is the fruit of a specific way of Bible reading: as if the Bible was written by an external observer who saw all things happen from an objective point of view and wrote down his observations in a historical report. Well, that's a rather out-dated approach to the Bible. The Israelite and Jewish scholars worded their views on the present and the future in the form of historical stories. These stories contain abstract theological arguments expressed in concrete images and storylines. Often difficult for modern Western readers to

understand. So, the stories of David aren't a historically reliable report of events that happened in his days, but a religious-political discussion about how a king in Israel should and should not reign over his people.

About the rest of your last e-mail, I'm a little bit surprised. I thought when you started our discussions that you wanted to discuss some questions about Adam, Eve and Noah, probably questions about the Adamite and Noahide Laws. But now I understand that not those questions were the purpose of your talk with me, but my personal life should be the real subject. Well, let I comment your remarks.

From a Jewish point of view there is no single necessity for a non-Jew like you and me to convert to Judaism. "Better a good goy than a bad Jew," Jews are used to say. But also, there isn't any objection for a non-Jew to be interested in Judaism. The problem of conversion certainly in our country is that conversion in a liberal synagogue isn't accepted by the orthodoxy, while conversion in an orthodox synagogue is such a heavy process that it alienates you from your family, friends, and colleagues. Why should you pay such a price? Only to feel yourself a better guy? And yes, that leaves me in a position where I'm at liberty to pick and choose from their religious system what I want, but not ignoring the rest! The rest I cannot, or I don't want to incorporate in my way of life is always present to study. Studying parts of Judaism that you don't practise could be very valuable for your attitude of life. Many Jews do the same.

Now, what about the Noahide laws and the world to come? Firstly, you talk about these things as if there is one and only one Jewish standpoint for all Jews on earth. Never, heard the joke: "Two Jews, three opinions"? Secondly, the Noahide laws and the world-to-come aren't casted in concrete. The Noahide laws are meant for non-Jews in their contacts with Jews and especially when living in Jewish communities. In the Rabbinic literature there is discussion about which rules belong to them and which rules don't. Thirdly, the world-to-come is a fluid concept used in many different ways by many different rabbis. My conclusion from Judaism is that the world-to-come consists of all those things in the present world that will contribute to the *tikun olam*, the improvement of the world as a response to the Torah. Even non-Jews who don't live exactly according to the Noahide laws are able to contribute to it. Finally, what do you think to know about my life to suggest that the Noahide laws don't play any part in it?

P.S. Have you ever read one of my books?

Best regards,
Peter

21 December 2021

Hello Peter,

Thanks for your last mail even if it seemed to express your prickliness about my even presuming to know what goes on in your life regarding certain beliefs!

I don't think it is necessary to go through all the points you made in your mail. Not because they aren't important or that they have little value but rather for this reason: that I now think I know the reason why and where we diverge in our thinking - at least at the basic level. It is this:

- that you consider that the Noahide laws are meant for non-Jews in their contacts with Jews and especially when living in Jewish communities;
- that I consider that the Noahide laws (presuming there is a God) are meant for non-Jews everywhere in the world *including* those living in proximity of Jewish communities.

This difference in perception is absolutely huge in my opinion. And it explains to me where we differ in opinion.

Perhaps I have been reading the wrong literature that has caused me to believe my all-inclusive view. Some examples: According to the Talmud, the Noahide laws apply to ALL of humanity. In Judaism, the term *B'nei Noach* (Hebrew: בני נח, "Sons of Noah") refers to all mankind.

- Vana, Liliane (May 2013). Trigano, Shmuel (ed.). "Les lois noahides: Une mini-Torah pré-sinaïtique pour l'humanité et pour Israël". *Pardés: Études et culture juives* (in French). Paris: Éditions in Press. **52** (2): 211-236. doi:10.3917/parde.052.0211. eISSN 2271-1880. ISBN 978-2-84835-260-2. ISSN 0295-5652 – via Cairn.info.
- Berlin, Meyer; Zevin, Shlomo Yosef, eds. (1992) [1969]. "BEN NOAH". *Encyclopedia Talmudica: A Digest of Halachic Literature and Jewish Law from the Tannaitic Period to the Present Time, Alphabetically Arranged*. IV. Jerusalem: Yad Harav Herzog (Emet). pp. 360–380. ISBN 0873067142.
- "Jewish Concepts: The Seven Noachide Laws". Jewish Virtual Library. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (AICE). 2021 [2017]. Archived from the original on 10 February 2017. Retrieved 17 October 2021. Except for the seventh law, all are negative commands, and the last itself is usually interpreted as commanding the enforcement of the others. They are derived exegetically from divine demands addressed to Adam and Noah, the progenitors of all mankind, and are thus regarded as universal.
- Moses Maimonides (2012). "Hilkhos M'lakhim (Laws of Kings and Wars)". *Mishneh Torah*. Translated by Brauner, Reuven. Sefaria. p. 8:11–14. Retrieved 7 November 2020.
- Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Laws_of_Noah].

Let me now answer your specific question before concluding. I cannot recall having read any of your books but I have read several of your other writings. An example I remember well is 'Joodse groepen in de tijd van Jezus' (*Jewish Groups in Jesus' Time*). Especially your historical investigations (looking back!) I found most interesting and enlightening.

Conclusion: Is there anything more to be said? If so, you are most welcome to reply, and I will do my best to respond. If not, then it only remains for me to thank you for your time and effort put into this discussion.

Regards,
Michel

30 December 2021

Hello Michel,

There is a logical rule that what isn't said isn't excluded automatically. That's also true for what I've written about the Noahide laws thus far. The Noahide laws are absolutely meant for non-Jews everywhere in the world and in all times of history. But the question is, how could a non-Jewish Indian in the jungle of South America or a non-Jewish Aboriginal in Australia know the seven rules of the sons of Noah? Isn't it only because of contacts with the Jewish world if not directly than indirectly? We as non-Jews know the Noahide laws only because we know Judaism. These laws aren't invented by the sons of Noah but by the sons of Israel. Without the Jewish tradition they never would have existed. A non-Jew without knowledge of Judaism reading the first nine chapters of the Torah would never have invented them. There is even something strange with them.

Reading the literal text of Genesis 9:1-7 one could derive the following laws for the sons of Noah:

1. The commandment to conceive offspring (verse 1);
2. The prohibition to eat flesh of a living animal and maybe flesh that hasn't bled out properly (verses 3-4).
3. If it's not meant only as a description of how things happen in the world: the commandment to give the death penalty for a murder (verse 6).

Strange enough, only prohibition 2 belongs to the Noahide laws. How could the Indians and the Aboriginals know? And closer to home, how could Christians know who never studied Jewish tradition?

The problem is that the seven (or more) Noahide laws the rabbis derived from the text of the Torah by the midrash method of exegesis aren't mentioned literally (with the one mentioned exception) in the story of the covenant of Noah. They belong to the Oral Torah of Judaism. We know them only because the Rabbis ultimately chose them from a wider range of commandments in the Torah which they had been able to associate with the text of the Noah story by the method of word association. So, the sons of Noah, the non-Jews, can only fulfil the Noahide laws associating themselves with the Jewish tradition and studying the Rabbinic explanation of the text of the Bible.

So, Michel, there could be a more fundamental difference between your thinking and mine. My impression is that you suppose (without believing in it) the existence of a universal God

for all mankind not tied to a special people. Well, that's not my believe. For me there is no knowledge of God nor of the Noahide laws without our association with the people of Israel and the Jewish tradition.

If I misinterpret your viewpoint about this issue, let me know.

Best regards,
Peter

2 January 2022

Hello Peter,

Thanks for your mail. I have read it carefully and can agree with some things and disagree with others. Let me try to sort this out. [Note. For convenience I write 'Jews' but this can according to the context refer to 'Israelites' or 'Hebrew tribes' or 'Jewish orthodox stream'].

To discuss the Noahide issue rationally we must first decide how to do this. Are we discussing it from how we see things today or from how the wise rabbis of those days saw things?

I am convinced that in the time of Maimonides and the earlier rabbis they believed in a much more literal interpretation of the oral and written traditions of their forefathers. That they firmly believed that the Ten Commandments were actually given by God to Moses in a historical revelation on Horeb. And that similarly the Seven Commandments were revealed to Noah by God (whether reported in Tanakh or Talmud would have been of equal value).

In our times we can interpret the scriptures differently than they did. With the knowledge we have of evolution etc. we can for example see the stories of the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah, and the Flood as symbolic, figurative, or metaphorical expressions of how God created the earth and its inhabitants.

So seen from our time I agree with you that the Noahide Laws weren't invented by the sons of Noah (or given to them by God) but rather by the sons of Israel as you describe. This is undoubtedly how these laws historically came into being. And that they were then utilised to enable non-Jews to reside peacefully amongst the Jews. From this point of view, it is true what you say that none would even know of these Noahide laws if not from the Jews.

But seen from the point of view of the Talmudic rabbis, the picture changes. They say that the Noahide laws were revealed by God as eternal laws to be adhered to by Noah and *all* his descendants thus *including* the Jews as well. And also of course for the non-Jews who wished to reside amongst the Jews. Thus, this category of people was required to abandon any pagan beliefs they might have and return to the Noahide laws of their fore-fathers. If they had forgotten these laws, the Jews would remind them because they had happened to record these ancient laws. This is also true regarding all the other nations. The laws were

given by God to their forefathers. It was their own responsibility to remember and adhere to them and not depart from them by inventing differing religious systems for themselves. If they did forget the original God-ordained laws then the Jews saw themselves as a specially chosen race who, besides worshipping God in their own special manner, ALSO had the task of reminding those nations of the true (Noahide) laws that they were supposed to be obeying but weren't.

IN SUMMARY I think I can say that IF the Noahide laws were literally given by God to Noah and his descendants then you and I and everyone should be living by them and everything else is unnecessary or even forbidden extra baggage. If however the Noahide laws were invented over time by the Jews then we are at liberty to (partially or wholly) acknowledge or reject them as advice offered to us by the Jews.

Regarding the last paragraph of your last mail (30-12-2021) let me say this: This whole discussion so far presumes the existence of the God known as El/Elohim, Jahve etc. I think that to expand the discussion to include or exclude other Gods will be another step. Perhaps it would be better to round off this discussion first if possible?

Regards, Michel

10 January 2021

Hello Michel,

First your last point. You wrote at the end of your mail: "Regarding the last paragraph of your last mail (30-12-2021) let me say this: This whole discussion so far presumes the existence of the God known as El/Elohim, Jahve etc. I think that to expand the discussion to include or exclude other Gods will be another step. Perhaps it would be better to round off this discussion first if possible?"

My answer is that if you mean we are discussing about the God of Israel who is not only the then God but also the now-adays God of the Jewish people, and we see Him just like the Jewish people themselves see Him, then we could indeed round off this discussion. For me it's an important point, because many Christians I meet also believe in the God known as El/Elohim, Jahve etc. from the Old Testament, but don't see Him as especially the God of now-adays Israel/Judaism. Some of them, when one tells them that the God of Jesus has a special relation with the people of Israel even deny that, saying that Jesus could have been born within every nation on earth. For me this is the red line. In that case we discuss about a different God. Okay, issue closed?

Then your first point: from what perspective do we discuss the meaning of the Noahide laws? You are right, there is a difference between their meaning considered from how we see things today, and how the rabbis of the Middle Ages saw them. That last perspective is a historical one: How could we exactly know what the earlier rabbis thought about it? We can only postulate our own interpretations of their believes. When I read the Talmud and the Midrash I come across many discussions among the rabbis about at first sight historical

issues, discussions consisting of many different viewpoints about the "historical course of things". Was Adam created vertically with his feet on the earth and his head in heaven? Or was he created horizontally with his feet at the western horizon and his head at the eastern one? Do you think these rabbis had the same opinion about history as we have today? I don't think so. So, what about the covenant with Noah. Were the Noahide laws given to Noah, or are they from Moses on Sinai?

The rabbis were convinced that every word spoken by a rabbi in a house of learning in all ages came from Moses on Sinai. What did they mean with that? There are so many often-contradictory opinions uttered in the Talmud. So, the Tora from Sinai is like a basket of seeds to be developed by the gardeners into stalks, leaves, flowers and borders, every gardener in his own garden. Could it be that the earlier rabbis have seen the Noahide laws like that? They weren't literally given in the Tora, but the rabbis derived them from the Tora when they needed them in a new situation?

A problem in the history of religion - also in Judaism - is that stories that had been narratively told in some period to introduce solutions of problems, often were interpreted as historically reliable when read in later periods. And - I now come at the first perspective (our own time) - why should we be willing to accept the Noahide laws as we think the rabbis of the Middle Ages saw them? We live in our own time with our own knowledge and perspectives. It's impossible to ignore that. So, why should we try to imitate our picture of earlier rabbis. Better we could try to learn from them meaningful things for our own situation making our own selections and choices.

May I finally quote Schalom Ben-Chorin (*Paulus, Der Völkerapostel in jüdischer Sicht*, München, 1980, p. 65): "Die individuellen Zugänge zum Heil blieben für das Judentum eine Grundwahrheit: *Harbe Pethachim la-Makom*, heisst es in einem rabbinischen Wort, das frei übersetzt lautet: Es gibt viele Zugänge zu Gott [...]. Das heisst, dass sich jedem Lernenden anders erschliesst, gemäss seiner Individualität." Nothing wrong with to seek your own entrance!

With kind regards,
Peter

17 January 2021

Hello Peter,

One of the points you made in your last mail ["... A problem in the history of religion - also in Judaism - is that stories that had been narratively told in some period to introduce solutions of problems, often were interpreted as historically reliable when read in later periods ..."] I can wholly agree with. Of all the different telling genres used in the Bible there is sometimes no clear delineation between them. That is also one of the reasons making this discussion so unnecessarily complicated. But let me attempt to persevere anyway. Other points you made I will return to in the last paragraph.

I have been thinking about this discussion between us. It started as a question about Adam & Eve & Noah/Noahide laws. I initiated this because I was interested to know your view about this and if and how we differ in thought about this. Have we answered these questions in the meantime? I think we have, at least partially. But the discussion has also raised a related issue. I will attempt to summarise the discussion as of present.

[A - regarding the original questions] 1) God created Adam and Eve/mankind and gave them instructions (6 'Adamic laws') of how to live in the newly created world – fact or myth? 2) God gave Noah instructions (7 'Noahide laws') of how to live after the Flood in the newly cleansed world – fact or myth? 3) Similarly, God gave Moses instructions (10 'Mosaic laws') on Horeb about how the Hebrews were to live – fact or myth?

The answers to these questions that I think that have emerged so far are these (if I am mistaken you are free to correct me): 1) Yes, God did create the world (perhaps through evolution?) but no, He did not directly manifest any specific laws to the first humans through a special revelation. 2) No, God did not directly manifest any specific laws to Noah. It is not certain if Noah was a historical person. The 'Noahide laws' were developed later by the Jews for the purpose of integrating non-Jews into their society. (Regarding the Genesis 9:1-7 laws: were these given directly by God to Noah or were they too developed later by the Jews?) 3) Moses - the answer to this question has not yet emerged in this discussion.

[B – regarding a related question] This related question arises from a misunderstanding. When I wrote "...that to expand the discussion to include or exclude other Gods will be another step. Perhaps it would be better to round off THIS discussion first if possible?..." I meant that we should round off the Noah discussion first before talking about the 'which God?' one. I think that you thought that I wanted to round off the discussion about 'which God' first! This would explain your 'red line' reaction before the discussion had even started!

By the way, this related question about 'which God' began when you wrote "... My impression is that you suppose (without believing in it) the existence of a universal God for all mankind not tied to a special people..." Well, that happens not to be the case. But before going into this 'related question', I thought it would be better to first finish the 'Noah' question. If you are at all interested, then I am willing to discuss this 'which God' question too but that is up to you.

Last paragraph. From what you wrote I get this impression: that God through His interactions with the Jews so inspired them to develop certain laws and attitudes at different stages of their history. But these developments were primarily designed to serve the people at the time that they were developed and under those particular circumstances. The Jews nevertheless recorded these events which caused some confusion for later generations when they discovered that circumstances had since changed. Thus, to still be able to utilise the original laws and attitudes it is necessary to adapt them where possible to suit the contemporary circumstances. Is this more or less what you are saying? As for the Ben-Chorin quote: no, there is no objection to everyone seeking their own way. However, one

consequence of this approach could mean an even more diversified approach on how to interact with God than there already is.

Regards, Michel

25 January 2021

Hello Michel,

Regarding your second paragraph, I would like to summarize my view as follows: The opinions of the rabbis about the Noahide laws are important and should be studied seriously, but ultimately we have to form our own opinion about this matter also dependent on our own circumstances. For me this means that I try to follow these laws as best as possible, but when they would estrange me from my beloved social environment (non-Jewish as well as Jewish but not living kosher) I will not always behave consistently in accordance with them.

Regarding your point A, I would like to exclude the historical question. Let's try to approach the Biblical stories as narrative theology, i.e. as stories, not as history. Yes, God created Adam and Eve and gave them several commandments: 1) to be fruitful and multiply; 2) to live vegetarian; 3) not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; 4) to eat bread in the sweat of their face (if we can see this as a commandment). Maybe, reading the texts thoroughly, you could find some more commandments. However, these are not the Adamite laws you've found in the rabbinic literature. The same is true for the commandments to Noah and his sons in Genesis 9 as I enumerated them in my mail of the 30th of December. And in the case of Moses, he got many more commandments and prohibitions than the ten on the tables of stone. [By the way, how to count them is a problem in itself].

I think, instead of supposing that God gave the rabbinic Adamite and Noahide laws directly to Adam and Noah (i.e. the original story-tellers would have meant this with their stories), we could better believe that He revealed these laws in the discussions of the rabbis, in which discussions they tried to find indications of these laws in the texts of the Torah. In other words, the Adamite and Noahide laws weren't revealed to Adam and Noah, but to the rabbis seeking a justification for them in the stories of Genesis.

Regarding your point B, in my eyes the question about the Noahide laws can't be seen separately from the question which God we talk about. The Noahide laws are bounded up to the God of Israel. They have no sense when discussing other gods, haven't they?

In your last paragraph you summarize my views rather correctly. I would like to add that many circumstances the Jewish people lived in in the past haven't changed very much so that their former ways of living are still lawful today. And also, that adapting the original laws and attitudes to suit the contemporary circumstances should only be done if there are profound reasons for it. That the consequence of this approach could mean an even more

diversified approach on how to interact with God than there already is, is certainly true. It has been the reality of the Jewish world for centuries.

With kind regards,

Peter

31 January 2021

Hello Peter,

I find your approach to accepting the sometimes rather vague (vague in the sense that they happened a long time ago and are not easily verifiable) Biblical stories as narrative theology quite interesting. IF the Bible can be seen as the Word of God, then certainly God did not mean His Word to be readily comprehended by the ordinary man. Therefore, as with covid, we (lesser mortals) are reliant on the expert OMTers of the Bible to lead us in order that we may understand it correctly.

When you write in the first paragraph: "... but ultimately we have to form our own opinion ..." etc. I must agree with you. Karen Armstrong wrote in her History of God: "... Het kenmerk van een succesvolle religie is altijd geweest dat ze werkt, niet dat ze filosofisch of historisch kan worden bewezen..." [The quality of a successful religion has always been that it works, not that it could be proved philosophically or historically]. I have the impression that this too is your belief not only when it comes to the ancient stories in the Bible but also accepting the precepts therein: they must be workable for us even if that means that we make adjustments where necessary! By the way, I would suppose that Karen's observation would also be true for people of other gods and beliefs.

Have we said all that need be said in our discussion? For my part, yes. I did not start this conversation with the intention of criticizing your stance in religion but to try to get a better understanding of it. It seems to me that you are leaning very closely against the Judaic balloon without the intention or desire of entering it. IF this is so and if it works for you, go for it!

Regards,
Michel

5 February 2021

Hello Michel,

If your main question is properly answered by our discussions and there will rest no new questions yet, then it's time to finish our current mail correspondence. Thank you for your persistent reflections and subsequent bringing in new subjects. When you'll have further questions in future don't hesitate to start a new discussion with me.

By the way, my experience is that some other people could be interested in a discussion like we've had now. Are there any objections to publish it on my website? And if not, could I mention your name in it or should I rather use initials or an alias for you? I'll edit the texts and send you a concept before making a webpage of it. Feel free to make your choice. I'll not do it without your agreement.

With kind regards,
Peter

6 February 2021

Hallo Peter,

No objections. Once again, thank you for your patience and input about our discussion.

As to new questions for a discussion, I will leave them for someone else for the time being.

Regards from
Michel