



## Facts, Fiction, and the Bible: The Truth Behind the Stories in the Old Testament

**Gijsbert J.B. Sulman**

Balboa Press (Apr 12, 2016)

Softcover \$33.99 (670pp)

978-1-5043-0113-8

*The book is in its element when it aligns biblical stories to accepted historical records, particularly when it examines the exodus stories.*

Gijsbert Sulman's *Facts, Fiction, and the Bible* is a massive work of biblical inquiry that draws upon histories, pseudohistories, biblical scholarship, and intertextual comparison to question which portions of the Hebrew Bible are historical and which are not. Curiosity shines through this often provocative volume.

The book's aim is stated, bluntly and concisely, on its first pages: it seeks to determine what, out of all of the biblical stories, "really happened," and what can be chalked up to literary invention. This lofty undertaking is launched almost immediately and proceeds semichronologically—or along the Bible's chronology—for over five hundred pages.

In each chapter, Sulman draws upon an extensive reading list, incorporating respected biblical scholarship, notable period pieces like Josephus's works, and the books and articles of lay seekers like himself, including controversial titles like Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. This far-reaching synthesis bespeaks insatiable curiosity, as well as a willingness to treat each theory on equal footing. This eager cross-referencing of projects from across disciplines stands to fascinate and shock those not already familiar with the drawn-upon work.

The book is in its element when it aligns biblical stories to accepted historical records, particularly when it examines the exodus stories and Hebrew entries into early Palestine against Egyptian and ancient Near Eastern history. Sulman's presentation of the regional history beyond the Bible's bounds is thorough and painstaking. Those looking for a quick reference to understand a particular story's context may find this to be a valuable research tool itself.

Yet the work's ideal audience remains largely unclear. Christian audiences are somewhat presumed throughout, though Sulman's treatment of the Hebrew Bible does not hold much sacred. Much of the work, particularly early on, rules in favor of naming stories as religious fiction or embellishment rather than fact. Students in biblical disciplines will be familiar with many such claims: that Noah is drawn from the Gilgamesh myth; that Adam and Eve cannot have been real.

Less familiar are treatments of miraculous stories—the end of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues that afflicted ancient Egypt—in terms of natural disasters, from volcanoes to tsunamis. Chapters are a willing dance between textbook exegesis and creative theorizing, if later chapters that deal with texts outside of the timeline, particularly Esther, strain the model a bit much. Occasional connections of ancient persecutions to modern persecutions of Jewish communities present the work's most awkward, least biblically centered moments.

It becomes the audience's job to mete out the most logical suppositions from more daring ones, leading to a work that, while certain to ignite imaginations, is likely to fit awkwardly among other Bible reference works. The book is impeded greatly by its lack of contextualizing material, particularly by its abrupt and conclusion-free ending. Still, the exercises themselves are engrossing, and the book's pet fascinations are infectious. Sulman weaves together theories from

across disciplines with remarkable clarity and organization.

Those looking to engage the Hebrew Bible on a story-by-story basis are likely to find *Facts, Fiction, and the Bible* useful for the ways in which it synthesizes extant theories, making this a useful and often surprising reference text.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March 1, 2017)

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