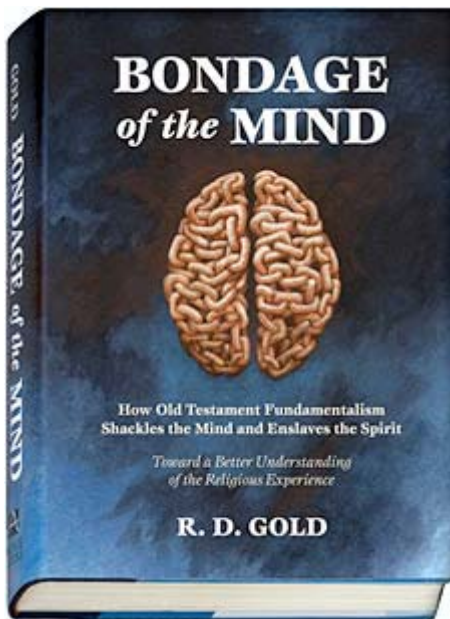


Title: Fundamental truths
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Review of R. D. Gold's book entitled [Bondage of the Mind: How Old Testament Fundamentalism Shackles the Mind and Enslaves the Spirit](#) (Aldus Books, 2008, ISBN13 978-0979640605).



MOST OF US INVOLVED with issues of critical thinking are accustomed to dealing with what we think of as fundamentalism, which implies specifically *Christian* fundamentalism. *Bondage of the Mind* deals, specifically, with Jewish fundamentalism. Just as evangelicalism, and particularly evangelical fundamentalism, is a potent force in Christianity, so too is modern Orthodox Judaism a potent force among Jews today.

Orthodox Judaism, like fundamentalist Christianity, claims to be the only valid form of Judaism. In the process of evangelizing Jews, particularly Jewish youth, it refers to Jews who switch their allegiance from Reform Judaism to Orthodox Judaism as returnees. For those unacquainted with the three ideological branches of Judaism — Orthodox, Reform and Conservative — the origins of the split lie in the Jewish Enlightenment of the 19th century. Until the Jewish Enlightenment, most European thinkers viewed the Jews of Europe as hopelessly backward both intellectually and culturally. The encapsulation of the Jews, their segregation from the surrounding Christian society (resulting from centuries of intermittent persecution) had resulted in their intellectual isolation. While European society at large had been effectively secularized in the 1700s, in part as a reaction to the horrors of the religious wars (particularly the Thirty Years War), Jews had largely remained what they were in the Middle Ages.

The spread of democratic ideologies in the 19th century led to a repudiation of anti-Semitism among at least some of the intellectuals of that day, as well as a reduction in legal isolation of the Jews. There was a resulting reaction to these reforms among Jewish intellectuals: the Jewish Enlightenment. Jews began to question the excessive importance laid upon such practices as the dietary laws and the peculiarities of dress affected by the encapsulated Jews. The end result was the repudiation of these peculiarities among those who became reformed Jews. Reformed Jews also engaged and integrated into the greater society around them. The origin of Jewish intellectualism and the impact of Jewish philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, artists, classical musicians and others — an impact out of all proportion to their numbers — dates from this 19th century enlightenment.

Some Jews among those in the reform movement felt that the degree of assimilation had gone too far and made a point of returning to such practices as maintaining the dietary laws and the study of Hebrew, though they did not return to the traditional peculiarities of dress. They became the Conservative Jews. Those Jews who did not engage the greater society, who in fact resisted all such efforts, hardened their resolve to retain all the outward signs of separation, became the Orthodox Jews. We might compare this movement to the Catholic counter-reformation, which was a reaction to Protestantism. Another apt comparison from the Christian experience would be the reaction of those who became fundamentalists to the wholehearted liberal acceptance of modern scientific views, particularly to the theory of evolution, among American Protestants.

For many decades fundamentalist Christians did not engage the general Protestant community and maintained in separation what they saw as the purity of their belief system. However, in the wake of the social upheavals of the 1960s, fundamentalists began to actively proselytize the general population, particularly the young. By the 1980s they had, of course, become a potent force not only in their various denominations — such as the Southern Baptists, where fundamentalists ousted liberals from the leadership — but in politics as well. *Bondage of the Mind* deals with the active proselytizing of Orthodox rabbis, who specifically target the youth of Reformed Jewry. In his examination of the thoughts, goals and tactics of resurgent Jewish fundamentalism, Gold focuses on three tracts commonly used by Orthodox proselytizers: *On Judaism* by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, *Choose Life* by Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, and *Living Up ... to the Truth* by Rabbi David Gottlieb. In the latter two titles one can see the implicit assumption of moral superiority by the Orthodox rabbis: If you accept my hyper-religious view and abandon your secularism, you will be choosing life and truth. If you disagree, you're obviously deliberately choosing lies and death.

As in Christian fundamentalism, the Orthodox proselytizers target the youth among secular and Reformed Jews. In his book *Misquoting Jesus*, Bart Ehrman, speaking of his own involvement in evangelical Christianity in his teenage years, pointed out that those proselytizing youth for Protestant fundamentalism homed in on the insecurities and uncertainties of the young. The Orthodox proselytizers do the same thing. The person fishing for converts seems very positive and very certain of his views. He affects a paternal benevolence toward the potential convert and, lo and behold, he seems to know something about the youth's state of mind, saying, "You're confused, aren't you?" The youth thinks, "How did he know *that*?" Ehrman pointed out that, of course, he was confused. He was a teenager, after all.

Gold begins his book with a series of chapters detailing the Old Testament's failure to live up to the Orthodox claim that it is the word of God rather than the writings of men. This begins with the failure of biblical claims to match archaeology. There is, despite exhaustive attempts on the part of biblical archaeologists — many of whom were and are either committed Christians or devout Jews — no evidence of the presence of large numbers of Hebrews in late Bronze Age Egypt (i.e. the Egyptian captivity), nor is there any evidence of either the Exodus or the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites as detailed in the Book of Joshua. Nor is there any evidence of the united monarchy under David and Solomon. Further, while the Bible claims that the army of Sennacherib, King of Assyria, which was besieging Jerusalem, was miraculously annihilated by the angel of the Lord in a single night and that King Hezekiah triumphed over the Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35–37), history and archaeology instead support the Assyrian version of events, that Sennacherib sacked and devastated every city of Judah but Jerusalem, and that Hezekiah paid a huge tribute to the Assyrians just to hang on to Jerusalem and its environs.

Gold also details the failure of the biblical claim of divine retribution and the failure of biblical prophecies. A spectacular example of the good being punished, while the bad obviously get off free is to be found at the end of 2 Kings. Manasseh, the evil king of Judah who worshipped other gods, and consulted soothsayers and wizards, enjoyed a long and peaceful reign (692–639 BCE, 53 years), while King Josiah, the greatest among Judah's reformers was killed in battle when he was only 37. Josiah was only eight when he took the throne. He reigned from 638–609 BCE, a total of 29 years, much of it when he was in his minority. So why did the evil King Manasseh prosper, while the good King Josiah was cut off in his youth? The Bible explains it this way (2 Kings 23:25–26):

And like unto him there was no king before him, that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and all his soul, and all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. Notwithstanding, the LORD turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him withal.

So, there you have it. According to the Bible, God kills the good for the sins of the evil and punishes the people for wrongdoing on the part of their king. It reminds one of the old vaudeville routine: “The act before me was so bad, the audience was still booing when I got off the stage.” Apologists, both Christian and Jewish, have wrestled with the passage above, often indulging in bizarre convolutions of logic to explain why it really makes sense and shows that God is good and just in killing Josiah, while not punishing Manasseh.

Gold next takes on the Orthodox dogma of the unique survival of the Jewish people, one of their main arguments for the Jews being God’s specifically chosen people. The argument goes like this: No people in history has suffered the way the Jews have. By all rights, the Jewish people should be extinct by now. Yet, not only have they miraculously survived the Holocaust, but, against all probability, they have returned to Israel and revived their ancient nation. Gold points out that the Jews aren’t the only people with an ancient pedigree to survive into the modern age (p. 91):

Nor is the survival of the Jewish people for thousands of years the unique phenomenon the Orthodox like to claim that it is. The Basques, for example, have been around a lot longer than the Jews have. In fact, the Basque presence in the Pyrenees predates recorded history. The most recent genetic evidence suggests that they have survived in place for some forty thousand years, more than ten times the duration of an identifiable Jewish culture. And in (for them) modern times they handily survived violent passages of Carthaginians, Romans, Moors, Franks and Nazis.

Gold goes from this example and others into a detailed argument pointing out that, while the survival of the Jews in the face of diasporas and pogroms is remarkable it can be explained without divine intervention.

All of this leads up to Chapter 10, titled “The Fallacy of a Superior Fundamentalist Morality.” One can consider this to be in many ways the grand climax of the book. I call it the book’s killer chapter, and, at 44 pages, it’s a bit of a killer to get through, but well worth the effort. Gold begins the chapter by citing numerous passages from Rabbi Feldman’s *On Judaism*, which attack today’s society that characterize it as profoundly materialistic, miserable, hedonistic and without meaning. Only by returning to the rock-solid values of Orthodoxy can young Jews find their way out of this secular morass. Gold points out that Feldman uses certain emotionally loaded words to slant his critique of all society not part of Orthodox Judaism. He pinpoints the Orthodox strategy and its logical flaws very nicely on page 128:

What Feldman and Gottlieb are doing is pretty obvious. They are attempting to capitalize on the general, vague belief that a loosening of religious standards inevitably leads to a loosening of moral standards. There are two serious defects with this tactic. First, one can make a strong argument — and shortly I do — that strict religious standards often involve practices that many would call highly immoral. I am not referring to the devout believer who goes astray. I am talking about beliefs and practices that are embedded in the religious doctrines themselves.

After pointing out that Western society, despite its problems is still the one in which men and women enjoy the greatest personal freedom, Gold turns his attention to the problem of what values Orthodox Judaism would replace the secular freedoms we currently enjoy. First, he points out the intolerance of the Orthodox for other forms of Judaism. In 2001 Israel’s Supreme Court ruled that Israeli citizens converted to Judaism by non-Orthodox rabbis were to be registered as Jews. This hardly seems a radical move; but the response from the Orthodox was that the decision was scandalous and disastrous.

Gold then examines the position of women in Orthodox Judaism. Not only are women excluded from participation in religious services, they aren’t likely to be treated as fully human outside that context either. Gold relates (p. 137) the nature of an interview given to Deborah Sontag by Rabbi Menacham Mendel Taub

in 2000. Questions and answers were related through a secretary, since the rabbi didn't take questions from women, and assistants placed a barrier between Sontag and the Rabbi, so he wouldn't have to even see her. Orthodox males recite a blessing each morning thanking God "for not making me a woman." One of the great reforms of the Jewish Enlightenment was to give women the right to an education.

Gold also points out that Orthodox rabbis don't seem to think they should be accountable to government oversight, or, indeed, accountable to anyone at all (p. 148):

Consider what Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of the Shas Party in Israel ... had to say in 2000 about the then minister of education, Yossi Sarid. Apparently the rabbi was upset that Sarid wanted more oversight of Shas schools because of what could politely be called "irregularities." Yosef was also riled because Aryeh Deri, the Shas political leader had been indicted on charges of graft and corruption... [During a television broadcast] From a synagogue in Jerusalem, the rabbi called Sarid "Satan," and said that God "extirpated Amalek so he may extirpate Sarid... Just as he showed us in killing Haman and the vengeance done on Haman, so will vengeance be done on Sarid." He then led his congregation in a chant of: "Accursed is Haman. Accursed is Sarid."

Gold goes on to say that, since this incident happened just after the assassination Yitzhak Rabin by a, notably, Orthodox Jew, Israel's Attorney General was prepared to prosecute Yosef for incitement to violence. However, because of his religious and political power, the rabbi was untouchable, and the incident was allowed to fade. Gold goes on to point out other examples of virulent Orthodox rage against any opposition, making an excellent case for the comparison of these rabbis and their followers to Muslim theocrats. Common to both groups is an implicit, and sometimes explicit, hostility towards democracy. It's not too much of a stretch to say that, should their views overwhelm opposing viewpoints in Israel's pluralist society, that nation would, in short order, be converted into a theocratic state, not unlike Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Having earlier mentioned the indictment of Aryeh Deri for graft, Gold describes how, when Deri was, after a protracted process involving many appeals, convicted, crowds of the Orthodox faithful demonstrated against his (p. 158) "martyrdom at the hands of the secular elite." It appears that much of the vaunted moral superiority of religious conservatives is a matter of definition as opposed to action. Definition is involved in another way in the conviction of Jack Abramoff in 2006 for tax evasion and fraud (pp. 159, 160):

The intriguing question is how Abramoff, the four Hasidic men convicted of latent fraud, and others could continue to be, for all intents and purposes, observant Orthodox Jews, keeping the Sabbath, keeping kosher, offering all the prescribed blessings, going the whole nine yards of Orthodox belief, while engaging on immoral and criminal behavior. The Orthodox answer? "[T]hat person by definition is simply not a religious person," says Emmanuel Feldman. But isn't that the old rhetorical trick of truth by definition that we've seen before?

So, in the case of Aryeh Deri, he's a religious person who couldn't possibly be guilty of what he was guilty of, and in the case of Jack Abramoff, since he's guilty, he wasn't really a religious person anyway. This is a classic unfalsifiable position. Unfalsifiable positions are irrational and dishonest in matters pertaining to science. In matters pertaining to ethics, they are downright reprehensible.

Other examples of reprehensible behavior on the part of the Orthodox revealed by Gold involve Orthodox authorities shielding rabbis known to have sexually abused teenagers and children from exposure and prosecution (pp. 160–162). Considering that Roman Catholic authorities did likewise with respect to pedophile priests, one can see that the problem is endemic in religious authority structures forced to confront immoral and unethical behavior on the part of their functionaries. Of course, this is not a problem of

religious power structures alone. What it points up, however, is that all power structures need checks and balances and must be accountable for their actions by the authority of the people. The problem with religious power structures is often — and this seems particularly true, considering what God has to say, of Orthodox Judaism — that they refuse to submit, often with a certain self-righteousness, to outside oversight. This also points up the utter bankruptcy of Orthodox Judaism's claims to moral superiority.

This book is thoroughly researched, well written and easily readable. *Bondage of the Mind* is R. D. Gold's first book. It is an auspicious beginning.