[Journal of Textual Reasoning](https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr)

Volume 9
Number 1 *History, the Bible, and Secular Jewish Identity*

September 2016

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Blaire French
University of Virginia

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Recommended Citation

French, Blaire. "Between Belief and Wonder." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 9, no. 1 (2016): 87-94. https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-jz5q-g476.

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Journal of Textual Reasoning 9:1 (December 2016)
ISSN: 1939-7518

BETWEEN BELIEF AND WONDER

BLAIRE FRENCH
University of Virginia

It is gratifying to see my d'var, delivered as part of a Shabbat morning service, spark these thoughtful essays for the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*. Six authors have engaged in their own search for evocative Jewish history, with illuminating results. I offer my comments in honor of their efforts.

In my d'var, I posited that Chronicles illustrated Yosef Yerushalmi's assertion that terrible ruptures often spawn meaningful reconfigurations of tradition. The Chronicler, writing in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile, attempted to accomplish this feat through his revision of sacred history. Expanding on the implications of the Chronicler's history for a Second Temple audience, Mark Leuchter goes one step further. He argues that, though the exile was ever in the background, it is more accurate to view Chronicles as part of a constellation of biblical books responding to "Persian imperial mythology."

For Leuchter, the key texts within this group for the Chronicler were Ezra and Nehemiah, as evidenced by Chronicles' reproduction of Ezra 1:1-4 (the edict of Cyrus). In Ezra-Nehemiah, these verses are a prelude to God's winnowing of "foreigners" from the Jewish community. In Chronicles, they illustrate something different: the fulfillment of prophecy regarding the duration of the exile as well as God's power over all, including the Persian king Cyrus. The doublet in Chronicles thus

simultaneously acknowledges and challenges Ezra-Nehemiah's narrow view of Jewish identity and history. According to Leuchter, the Chronicler's preservation of the Ezra passage invited his audience to reflect on the available alternatives much in the manner prescribed by Wisdom literature. By bringing to light these dimensions of the Chronicler's enterprise, Leuchter issues a similar invitation to his Jewish readers. They should consider the broad spectrum of practice and belief within Judaism as they develop their own sense of what it means to be Jewish.

Leuchter, to my mind, rightly calls attention to the fact that Chronicles was one of many texts that attempted to address post-exilic concerns. His contention that the Chronicler "does not lay exclusive claim to the construction of a new memory," however, is open to question. I consider it equally plausible that the Chronicler's citation of Ezra was a bid to appropriate the authority of that text with the purpose of supplanting it. The expectation and hope would then have been that Ezra-Nehemiah's account would eventually wither away. If this is the case, the members of the community that retained Chronicles alongside Ezra-Nehemiah in their (and now our) canon of Hebrew scripture deserve the credit for preserving "diversity and difference," not the Chronicler. It is often the readers of history, not the writers of history, who determine what counts as history. Leuchter himself, in a way I admire, exemplifies this fact.

Ashleigh Elser's essay explores "the nature and limits of faithful representation"—or, to put the matter as a question—how much may a revision vary and yet still remain true to its source? She cites Julius Wellhausen's charge that the Chronicler violated the integrity of his received traditions by arbitrarily rewriting Israel's past. Contrary to Wellhausen, Elser seeks to demonstrate that the Chronicler was anything but arbitrary. Specifically, she argues that the language of Genesis-Kings formed a fixed boundary, which the Chronicler willingly embraced. Through the reordering of exact phrases and alteration of what a given word signifies, the Chronicler hewed closely to his sources while infusing them with new vitality and meaning. This considered combination of innovation and preservation was the Chronicler's special contribution.

Elser nonetheless takes to heart Wellhausen's criticism that Chronicles is a sanitized version of Samuel/Kings. She goes on to ponder what needs the Chronicler thought he met by a "whitewash [of] the legacy of biblical heroes" and by more closely correlating "Torah observance and divine blessing." Introducing the modern tale *Life of Pi* as evidence, she argues that some listeners find more solace in beautiful, far-fetched stories than in unmediated reality. Elser goes on to compare the juxtaposition of Samuel/Kings and Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible to the presence of four variant gospels in the New Testament. She concludes by describing the insights to be gleaned from conflicting perspectives on the same historical events, noting that the effort to understand the discrepancies may produce "its own kind of revelation."

Elser's essay meticulously fleshes out how the Chronicler updated history within the confines of tradition. Her analysis potentially opens up new points of entry into the Tanach for contemporary Jewish "history-tellers." Appropriation of the Chronicler's techniques and strategies could make their own adaptations of biblical tales more meaningful. The ultimate challenge, of course, would be to update Chronicles itself.

But what are risks of this contemporary project of updating biblical texts? One approach attempts to grasp the original spirit of a story and translate it into terms more readily accessible for a modern audience. In this instance, the reteller subjugates herself to her source. Another approach, in an effort to be relevant, takes modern categories and reads them back into the narratives of the biblical authors. Much is thereby lost. We do no more than recreate our world in theirs. My d'var stressed Esther's pertinence for Jews today, but I did not mean to say that all scripture is—or should be made to be—consonant with twenty-first-century sensibilities. In many instances, the Torah's *irrelevance* is its most valuable contribution. When the past and the present are allowed to collide, readers gain a vantage point from which they may survey both. In the search for evocative history, the alien elements of our heritage must never be erased.

Daniel Weiss's essay picks up the theme of my d'var that the book of Esther provides a scriptural blueprint for creating a modern Jewish

identity, and he offers some intriguing reflections. He begins by interrogating the commonly used terms "religious Jew" and "secular Jew" and finds that the observance or nonobservance of daily ritual practices constitutes the difference between them. To his way of thinking, however, these terms shed no light on the Jews of Susa, as their distinctive trait stems from political considerations rather than ritual practice. Specifically, Weiss argues that Mordecai's mention of his Jewish identity in connection with his refusal to bow to Haman implies that Susa's Jews as a whole refused to prostrate themselves to humans. This implication is further strengthened by Haman's charge that the Jews do not keep the king's laws. What sets Susa's Jews apart, according to Weiss, is their rejection of any claim to sovereignty other than that of God.

Weiss then considers the challenges American Jews would face if they acted in a similar fashion. He concludes that Esther's "third way" of constituting Jewish identity, one that is neither "secular" nor "religious," is what would prove most fruitful for a renewal of Jewish culture today. By his account, emulating this "third way" could have radical consequences, potentially calling into question whether Jews should pledge allegiance to the United States or allow themselves to be conscripted into military service. Such a rethinking of how to relate to "structures of human sovereignty" could be invigorating and transformative.

Weiss's assertion that Jewish identity in Esther emerges out of political action is novel and striking. I cannot, however, share his interpretation—and thus many of the implications he draws from it. My preferred reading of Esther attaches less importance to Mordecai's deeds and sets the subsequent actions of the Jewish community on a higher plane. Much has been said, as Weiss points out, about Mordecai's probity. The text leaves open whether Mordecai's refusal to bow is dictated by religious scruples or by personal hostility. Whether the book judges him to be acting prudently is another question. The author of Esther could be suggesting that Jews in foreign territory ought to make some accommodation to the customs of their hosts. Moreover, the report that the Jews do not keep the king's laws may not be credible, given that

Haman is its source. The upshot for me is that Esther provides no warrant for the notion that Jews should not engage in civic activities, or that such actions challenge their Jewishness. Of course there might be other religious grounds for refusing to go to war or say the Pledge of Allegiance, but not on the basis of the views Weiss derives from Esther.

How, then, does Esther grant insight into our own situation today? In my view, the act that truly defines the Jewish community in Esther is described in the book's climax: the decision by the Jews of Susa to establish an annual Jewish custom for all time. This act, too, illustrates a "third way," as it generated a venerated and enduring ritual practice without resort to divine authority. In the end, Esther invites modern Jews to ponder how much of their Jewish identity, like those of the Jews of Susa, is owing to the collective will.

For Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, the biblical tale that best speaks to contemporary Jews is the story of Ruth. Her essay draws on the findings of the 2013 Pew Center Research Survey, which identifies "ancestry and culture," remembrance of the Holocaust, and a commitment to lead "an ethical life" as the constituent elements of American Jewish identity. Stahlberg posits that the Holocaust has a status for modern Jews parallel to that of the exile for the Judahites in the Second Temple period. Both are catastrophic ruptures that demand a response, one that links current circumstances to a shared past. Stahlberg's essay reveals Ruth's potential to bridge this gap for certain segments of post-Holocaust Jews.

Ruth's story, according to Stahlberg, could serve secularized modern Jews by (re-)connecting them with "scriptural Judaism" because it accords with their intuitions and personal experiences. The book grants great prominence to lovingkindness (*hesed*) and poignantly depicts compassionate treatment of the widow, the foreigner, the poor, and the marginalized in society. It also challenges and revises exclusivity (the Deuteronomic ban on Moabites), a positive and powerful feature in light of the high incidence of intermarriage among the survey's Jewish respondents. Ruth should thus appeal to the large number of contemporary Jews who seek an egalitarian and inclusive framing of traditional beliefs and practices.

Stalberg's recourse to Ruth elucidates one path to evocative history. Yet, to my mind, Esther has greater relevance, in part because of its inherently modern cast. Esther's intermarriage passes without comment, and the Jews' inclusion of "all who joined them" in their covenant is a feature that would fit right in with today's "big tent Judaism." By the same token, the minority status of Jews in Esther better parallels the world in which Pew's Jews find themselves. Most importantly, Esther does *not* identify God as the source of blessing or as a reason for good behavior. Unlike Ruth, Esther assumes a universal understanding, independent of revelation, of justice, good, and evil—a point of natural connection with many modern Jews. Against the backdrop of this foundation, Esther offers a biblical model for constructing a Jewish community that leaves to one side the question of God's existence.

In his thoughtful essay, Jonathan L. Milevsky looks to rabbinic texts to explore the significance of "profane" history. One might think that the rabbis would only have been interested in sacred history—as some scholars in fact maintain. Milevsky thinks otherwise. By his account, even though the rabbis believed revelation had ceased, they continued to affirm that historical events held untapped significance for future generations. Milevsky turns to the Talmudic record to illustrate his point. In b. Megillah 7a, Esther asks the scribes to "write [her] for generations"—meaning to commemorate or fix her in history. It would have been sufficient, Milevsky points out, for Esther simply to ask that the scribes "write" her without mentioning "for generations" since "the canon is clearly understood to serve future generations as well." The addition of "for generations" indicates that "the writing itself can and should be done *for the sake of* future generations"— that is, "in a way that future generations would find relevant." The fact that the book of Esther has endured and continues to command our attention is confirmation for Milevsky that it has "heavenly approval."

Meaningful history is therefore not just a dry and desiccated record of the past, but a living and breathing source that engages and re-engages us. It is only worthwhile to the extent that it is capable of creating this connection. The search for evocative history remains central for Jewish

identity, whether its impetus is divine inspiration or Jews' own mysterious yearning to know their past.

Emily Filler powerfully elucidates the challenge of reading the Bible as a book of memory in this age of historical criticism. She tells of a recent sermon on the exodus in which the rabbi acknowledges the lack of archaeological evidence for the biblical account and urges his congregation to extract metaphorical truths from the tale instead. Filler rightly sees the flaws in this turn. God did not deliver the chosen people from abstractions. God took them from the iron furnace of Egypt. As Filler points out, the text of Exodus itself conveys the importance of collective memory in the forging of a people through its command to transmit to future generations an account of their liberation.

How is the modern Jew to negotiate the impasse between revelation and confirmable data? Filler finds the answer in the haggadah, the text read at each Passover Seder. Through the haggadah's exegesis of biblical verse as well as through the acts performed while the text is read, those gathered at the table enter the story. As Filler puts it, once participants are inside the ritual, "they are encouraged, if not forced, to 'remember the Exodus' through their actions and words…" The signs and wonders that accompanied the Israelites out of bondage thereby continually find new expression and relevance. The reliving of the event is more rightly characterized as an activation of belief—if only temporarily—than as a suspension of disbelief.

I would like to expand on Filler's description of a "participatory" reading and discuss the stepping back that follows the stepping in. Specifically, I would like to reflect on the experience of seeing, hearing, or feeling something that might be revelatory and deciding yay or nay or maybe. To me, the freedom to choose among these options is a hallmark of human autonomy. One reason that I'm attracted to the book of Esther is that it leaves it to the reader to decide whether to credit God with thwarting Haman's plot against the Jews.

Scripture itself shows us this independence at work. On a mission to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant takes his stand by the well and prays. He gives God a list of the deeds that will serve as a sign to indicate

which woman is the right one. Even before he is done praying, Rebecca arrives and does all that he had requested. The servant, however, does not immediately spring into action, but, waiting, “gaze[s] at her in silence to know whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful” (Gen 24:21). In other words, the servant decides to think about it. Coincidence or miracle?

The servant’s hesitation is paradigmatic. He captures the modern step back as he teeters between belief and wonder. That is where many of us Jews are today, and no book can help us better understand and appreciate this than the Torah.