



BONDAGE *of the* **MIND**

How Old Testament Fundamentalism Shackles the Mind and Enslaves the Spirit

By R.D. GOLD

Because religious themes can be so controversial, *BONDAGE OF THE MIND* makes an excellent book for discussion in upper-grade Sunday School classes, in adult education programs, and in book discussion groups. The questions presented below are meant to encourage thought and discussion. There are no “right” answers—only new ways of looking at ideas that are important, in some way, to each of us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Fundamentalist Mindset

Both Orthodox Jews and Christian Fundamentalists firmly believe that God gave the Torah (the Pentateuch) to his Chosen People, Israel, during the miraculous revelation at Mount Sinai. For Orthodox Jews this is the pivotal event in the history of the Jewish people. And for Evangelical Christians it is one of the crucial underpinnings of their fundamentalist belief system. *BONDAGE OF THE MIND* challenges this mindset, presenting evidence to suggest that the revelation never happened.

Questions for discussion:

- After reading the book, what do you, personally, believe? Why?
- Do you think you can believe in the revelation—and in the other miraculous events recounted in the Torah—while modernizing religious laws and practices for today’s world?

2. History vs. Myth

So much of the Bible is believed to be an accurate history of the ancient Jewish people. But modern archeology has dug up a great deal of compelling evidence to suggest that much of this history never happened—and certainly not as recounted in the Bible.

Questions for discussion:

- How does this awareness that the Exodus from Egypt probably didn’t happen impact your faith?
- As a Jew, if you doubt that the Exodus really happened, can you still find meaning in the Passover Seder? If so, what might that be?
- As a Christian (or as a Jew), do you feel disappointed emotionally that the venerated Bible stories could well be myth, fable, and legend rather than real history? Discuss your reactions.

3. Morality

For all religious fundamentalists moral behavior consists of doing God’s will, as laid out in Holy Scripture. They believe, further, that divine retribution will be meted out to those who fail to conduct themselves accordingly. For Orthodox Jews (the Jewish fundamentalists), doing God’s will means self-segregation and a series of very explicit and restrictive practices. *BONDAGE OF THE MIND* argues that fundamentalist practices are an anachronism in today’s world, and, moreover, that the Scriptures sanction behavior that is positively immoral.

Questions for discussion:

- Is it the fear of God’s punishment that motivates you to act the way you do?
- If not, what does?
- Can you explain how, if the Scripture is our timeless guide for proper moral behavior, that the Torah could sanction such a clearly immoral practice as slavery?

- Compare the moral precepts in the Bible with those of the Greek philosophers. What are the similarities? What are the differences? What makes more sense to you?

4. Women

Throughout the Old Testament blatant discrimination against women is the norm. The belief systems of both Orthodox Judaism and Evangelical Christianity specify different roles for men and women, with women always in the secondary, and often subservient roles.

Questions for discussion:

- It may be easy to criticize the treatment of women in Islamic society. Apart from the obvious differences of degree, is the role of women really that different, at root, in Orthodox Jewish society?
- How can you reconcile the Scriptures as the timeless guide for moral behavior with its treatment of women as second-class people?

5. Religion's Purpose

Orthodox Jews—and all religious fundamentalists—believe that the purpose of religion is to serve God and do God's will. BONDAGE OF THE MIND argues that religion should serve humanity, not the other way around.

Question for discussion:

Where do you come down on this issue? Why?

6. Understanding the Religious Experience

Orthodox Jews—and all religious fundamentalists—believe that to understand the religious experience one must devote a lifetime of study of the Holy Scriptures. BONDAGE OF THE MIND argues that to *really* understand the religious experience you have to understand the sociological, psychological, and biological reasons why religions developed.

Questions for discussion:

- Do you think there is anything to the theories and scientific research that suggests that spirituality is built into our neurobiological system?
- Or do you think the sociology of religion—the need for people to come together in meaningful communities—is the explanation for the growth of the world's religions?
- And what about the psychological need of people to believe that there is something more to the world and their lives than a random walk in a random universe?
- Where do you come down on the basic question of who is right?
 - The fundamentalists, who claim that the religious experience can be understood only by a lifetime of devout practices and study of the Holy Scriptures?
 - Or those who believe that the way to understand the religious experience is to understand its psychological, sociological, and neurobiological underpinnings?

7. Lesson for Children

In all fundamentalist religions, and especially in Orthodox Judaism, there is a great deal of unquestioning belief and ritual.

Questions for Discussion:

With a new understanding gained from reading this book:

- Will you continue to educate your children in religious beliefs as before?
- If not, how will you change their religious education?
- Do you think this will create a more harmonious world?