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Religious beliefs and history education: biblical stories among Jewish-Israeli adolescents' historical significance

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Abstract

Despite the significant impact of identity and cultural characteristics on historical thinking, the influence of religious aspects on students' historical understanding remains under-researched. This article addresses this gap by exploring the historical significance attributed to biblical stories among secular and religious Jewish adolescents, while also examining how history education extends beyond formal history classes. Although the Bible holds a central place in Jewish historical culture, biblical narratives are absent from Israeli school history curricula. This study employs quantitative methods to investigate students' attitudes towards biblical stories through two key questions: (1) What are the five most important events in history?; and (2) When did Zionism begin? The research sample included 350 Jewish Israeli adolescents, surveyed approximately two months after completing K–12 education in either the non-religious state education or the state-religious education systems. The findings reveal a profound impact of religious

identity and culture on students' historical significance. Among state-religious education graduates, more than 50% cited at least one biblical event as one of the most important in history, compared to less than 7% of non-religious state education graduates. Similarly, when considering the beginning of Zionism, state-religious education graduates referred to the biblical period three times more often than their secular counterparts. Despite the differences between educational systems, around 20% of non-religious state education graduates included biblical stories in their responses, underscoring the Bible's lasting influence on historical understanding in Israel.

Keywords historical significance; historical thinking; historical understanding; social identity; religious identity; faith-based education; Israel; Zionism

Introduction

Religion remains an integral part of twenty-first-century life. The post-secular critique has shown that the once-prevalent hypothesis predicting that modernisation and scientific progress would inevitably marginalise religion now seems distant and irrelevant. Instead, religious belief persists as a central force in global geopolitics, thriving in both advanced and developing societies (Casanova, 1994, 2007; Habermas, 2010). Furthermore, alongside the resurgence of religion in global politics, the post-secular approach has emphasised the need to dismantle the rigid dichotomy between the religious and secular categories, opening up a space of possibilities that encompasses a range of identities and complex epistemological perspectives (Asad, 2003; Hurd, 2015).

Despite the centrality of religion around the world – both in social terms and as an aspect of personal identity – its consideration within the field of history education remains relatively limited. This marginalisation may be due to the fact that most research in the field is conducted by scholars from developed democratic countries where there is a clear separation between religious causal explanations and historical inquiry, including specifically in history education. Additionally, the academic environment, which tends to disregard or take a paternalistic approach towards religious discourse, could also be a contributing factor. The marginal research focus on the role of religion in history education stands out especially in light of the recognised impact of students' identity characteristics on their learning and thinking processes, as well as the growing attention to the influence of epistemological perspectives on teaching and historical understanding (Elmersjö and Zanazanian, 2024; Monte-Sano and Reisman, 2016; Popa, 2022; Savenije et al., 2014). As will be described below, only a few studies have addressed the influence of religious factors on curricula and students' learning and understanding.

This article, therefore, seeks to respond to calls for further research examining how religious identity affects historical thinking, understanding and knowledge (Foster et al., 2015; Gibson et al., 2022; Seixas, 2017). To this end, it examines whether and how biblical narratives influence two fundamental aspects of Israeli adolescents' historical understanding: the way they attribute historical significance and their perceptions of Zionism. The attitudes of Israeli adolescents towards biblical narratives offer a unique case study, not only for understanding the interplay between religion and history education but also for exploring how history education occurs outside the classroom and how this might influence contemporary views on an ongoing violent conflict.

Jewish faith can profoundly affect students' historical perceptions in many ways (Weintraub and Naveh, 2020; Yadgar, 2011; Yerushalmi, 1982). However, focusing on biblical narratives allows us to reveal how history education occurs outside history classes, given that the biblical period is not included in the history curriculum at any grade level in the Israeli education systems (MoE, 2023a, 2023b). At the same time, despite its absence from the formal history curriculum, the Bible is taught as a separate subject in both secular and religious schools. Furthermore, the Bible significantly influences Jewish historical culture and society in Israel, ranging from the annual holiday calendar to common idioms and expressions (Ilany and Ben-Amos, 2021; Liebman and Don-Yehiya, 1983).

Given the Bible's significance in Jewish and Israeli cultures on the one hand, and its absence from the official history curriculum on the other, our investigation focuses on the following research questions:

RQ1. What place, if any, do Israeli adolescents consider the biblical stories have among the most important events or processes in history? And in what ways do the students' religious or gender identities influence this perception?
RQ2. What relation do Israeli students see, if any, between biblical history and Zionism? How is their view affected by their gender and religious identity?

The first research question will enable us to examine the role of the Bible in students' perceptions of historical significance. In the context of history education, historical significance refers to the decision-making process regarding which of the countless events, figures and processes from the past should be included in curricula and teaching. It also examines how teachers or students evaluate the importance of specific events or processes (Barton, 2005; Bergman, 2020; Gibson et al., 2022; Seixas, 1994). Nevertheless, research to date has been very limited in addressing whether and how religious characteristics influence the way students assign historical significance.

The second research question, which concerns the beginning of Zionism, examines how students' understanding of biblical stories not only develops outside the classroom, but also potentially conflicts with the official curriculum. Zionism is one of the core subjects in the history curricula of Israel's Jewish public education system. The curricula cover the Second Temple period and place a strong emphasis on the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel. However, formal history education highlights that Zionism began with the ideological revolution that the Zionist movement led in nineteenth-century Europe (Weintraub, 2020). In this sense, the issue being explored here is the tension between popular approaches that attribute the inception of Zionism to ancient Jewish nationhood and the scholarly consensus that emphasises the Zionist revolution, viewing Zionism as a phenomenon that began in the nineteenth century. Therefore, our two research questions seek to examine whether, in fact, students' historical significance and understanding corresponds to or contradicts the characteristics and objectives of the official curricula.

Religion and history education

Most academic research on history education has focused on secular or Christian contexts in Europe and North America. In these parts of the world, public education systems often include religious studies in various contexts and formats; however, the instruction itself does not originate from a religious perspective (for example, Freathy et al., 2017; Keränen-Pantsu and Rissanen, 2018; Thomas and Rolin, 2018). At the same time, in many other parts of the world where theological outlooks shape educational processes, the possibility of conducting academic research with a critical discourse is limited (Abdou, 2015; Arvisais and Guidère, 2020).

Since the 2000s, more attention has been directed towards questions of history education and religion. Research has addressed the dilemmas and challenges of teaching national history in classrooms with diverse student populations representing a wide range of ethnic and religious identities (Hawkey and Prior, 2010; Lundberg, 2024). Additionally, a substantial number of studies have focused on how religious elements are represented in teaching materials and curricula (Abdou, 2017; Douglass and Dunn, 2003; Estivalèzes, 2011; Jonker, 2011; Kisby, 2009; McAndrew et al., 2011; Otterbeck, 2005). Despite the growing interest in the relationship between religion and history education, research has largely remained focused on education systems that adopt a secular perspective – one that views religion as a human and contingent historical phenomenon rather than taking a religious standpoint (Weintraub and Naveh, 2020).

The recent Canadian debate on the tensions involved in integrating Indigenous world views into history education has highlighted a post-secular challenge in a developed Western nation. The post-secular nature of this challenge manifests in two ways. First, Indigenous beliefs do not fit into the categories of religion or secularism as shaped by European Christian thought. Second, efforts to incorporate Indigenous historical perspectives may undermine the established criteria of disciplinary historical inquiry. As Peter Seixas (2012) observed, Indigenous epistemologies have the potential to challenge the foundational principles of historical inquiry in schools. Seixas's (2012) concerns about the potential erosion of disciplinary principles sparked a broader debate. Samantha Cutrara (2018) accused Seixas of upholding a settler construct that marginalises Indigenous populations. In contrast, Gibson and Case (2019) contended that while acknowledging Eurocentric biases is crucial, it should not come at the cost of undermining historical discipline. They further argued that although the principles of historical

thinking may not directly lead to reconciliation or fully embrace the Indigenous world view, they can nonetheless play a supportive role in the process – a view corroborated by more recent research (Miles, 2019; Wallace-Casey, 2022).

In the area of learning and understanding history education, there has been particularly little consideration of the religious aspect. Despite the broad agreement in research on the significant impact of various identity characteristics on historical understanding and thinking (An, 2009; Epstein, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011; Peck, 2010), religious identity has received little specific attention. One of the few cases in this field is Porat's (2004, 2006) studies, which focused on how Israeli students interpret textbooks about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Porat found that the students' sociocultural context, in this case, a secular-liberal background versus a religious-Zionist one, profoundly influenced how they recollected the text and how they filled in the textual gaps left by the textbook authors. For an older and more professional audience, Gottlieb and Wineburg (2012) examined how religious historians read documents differently from their non-religious peers. They found that religious historians engaged in 'epistemic switching' when moving between historical sources about sacred texts such as the Exodus from Egypt and secular texts about the first Thanksgiving. These findings highlighted that people's historical interpretive mechanisms are not fixed abilities but rather thinking skills that can change depending on different contexts. Thus, an Orthodox Jewish historian might relate to the Exodus from Egypt differently depending on whether they are in their academic department or in synagogue celebrating Passover. Gottlieb and Wineburg (2012) thus demonstrate that religious historians are capable of setting aside faith-based elements in certain contexts. However, in other contexts, their religious thinking might strongly influence their historical thinking.

The marginal consideration of the religious aspect is also evident in research on historical significance (Seixas, 1994; Seixas and Morton, 2013). Even here, despite the recognition of the impact of students' or teachers' racial and cultural backgrounds, the studies did not examine the influence of a religious perspective on constructing historical significance (Bergman, 2020; Epstein, 1998; Gibson et al., 2022; Wineburg and Monte-Sano, 2008). An exception in this area was Keith Barton's (2005) research on the difference in constructing historical significance between students from Protestant and Catholic schools in Ireland. Barton (2005) notes, surprisingly, that there were no differences in the choice of important historical events between the two communities, nor in gender cross-sections. However, the way in which students explained their choices was influenced by the community to which they belonged. Similar to the model proposed by Weintraub and Naveh (2020), it appears that the differences between the groups stemmed mainly from the students' group-national identity rather than from epistemological or theological differences between the communities.

In light of all the above, despite the considerable influence that identity factors have on students' historical thinking and the prominent role of religion in many societies worldwide, no research has yet explored how the religious dimension shapes students' historical significance regarding events depicted in sacred or canonical texts. Moreover, studying Jewish Israeli adolescents in this context will enable us to examine not only the differences between various religions and denominations, such as Protestants and Catholics, but also the distinctions between believers and non-believers within the same faith.

Furthermore, the Israeli case allows us to examine the impact of religious aspects on perceptions of historical significance in the context of an intractable and violent conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013). Unlike the Irish case or post-colonial tensions in Canada, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict places Israeli adolescents in a reality marked by violent security threats and immediate danger, where religious-historical narratives play a central role. This context enables an investigation into how religious thinking influences perceptions of a violent conflict that constitutes a significant part of these adolescents' lived reality.

Israeli society and the Bible

The Bible is deeply ingrained in Israeli society and daily life. The official and spoken language, the annual holiday calendar, and the weekly day of rest – all are direct outcomes of biblical events and their role in Jewish culture over thousands of years. The Israeli landscape is interwoven with biblical references. Places across the country echo biblical descriptions, and the names of cities, rivers and geographical areas are often taken directly from the Bible. Moreover, many of the common names in Jewish Israeli society, both among religious and secular members, are derived from the Bible, often those of religious

heroes or descriptive terms found within it. Even the given names of the two authors of this article originate from the Bible.

Despite its foundational place in Jewish and Israeli culture, interpretations of the Bible vary greatly. Historically, the Bible was a cornerstone of Zionist culture within non-religious Jewish society, both in the pre-state period and during the first decades of Israel's existence. The term 'Zion', after all, is one of the names for Jerusalem in the Bible. The Zionist movement emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, closely linked to the processes of nationalism and secularisation of that period. Yet, despite its secular nature, the Bible was foundational to the movement's world view. Zionist leaders approached the Bible from a secular-cultural perspective, removing the elements of divine providence. Instead, they viewed its stories as a source of moral values and as evidence of the Jewish people's deep connection to the Land of Israel – a place where the Jewish nation was formed, maintained a thriving, sovereign state, and to which it must return (Dror, 2007; Raz-Krakotzkin, 2021; Shapira, 2004).

However, after the 1967 War, there was a profound shift in the role of the Bible among the non-religious public, and its status began to significantly decline. This was for two main reasons. First, certain groups within Israeli society view the Bible as the most fundamental basis for shaping their stance on the major political question that has divided Israeli society in recent decades – whether Israel should continue to control the territories captured in 1967 (Feige, 2009; Sagi and Schwartz, 2019). For many, particularly within the Religious Zionist movement, the Bible serves as a primary justification for controlling these territories, which they view as the biblical Judea and Samaria – the heart of ancient Jewish sovereignty. In contrast, many among the secular public have sought to distance any considerations related to the Bible from current political and security issues (Amit, 2010; Shapira, 2004).

The second reason for the decline in the Bible's status among the non-religious Israeli public is directly tied to the processes of globalisation and neoliberalism that transformed Israeli society beginning in the 1970s, and even more so in the 1980s. These trends are also connected to intellectual and scholarly developments that, over the decades, have eroded the classic Zionist narrative (Naveh, 2017, 2018; Ram, 2008).

Today, while the Bible remains a mandatory subject in the non-religious State Education (SE) system, the approach to it is interpretive and critical. The preamble to the curriculum for secondary education states:

> Among the various chapters of the Bible, the narrative chapters in the programme provide a good basis for value-based connections, dialogue, and diverse, meaningful thinking and learning for students. The stories arouse curiosity, critical thinking, empathy, and engagement with relevant ethical questions. (MoE, 2024: n.p.)

In other words, the curriculum, at least on a declarative level, avoids providing a direct historical interpretation of the biblical stories and overlooks their divine element. Instead, it presents the Bible as a cultural text, a foundational text for Jewish, Israeli and Western culture, capable of developing a range of skills and ethical perspectives in students. Furthermore, one of the central objectives of the comprehensive K–12 curriculum is to 'understand the process of the Bible's formation within its historical context', as well as to become familiar with the cultures of the ancient Near East in which biblical society operated (MoE, 2019: 8).

Reflecting the changes in the Bible's status in non-religious society, one can observe similar changes in the SE history curricula. While in the 1950s, and even in the 1970s, biblical stories were taught as part of the history curriculum (MoE, 1954, 1955, 1975), since the 1990s, they have been omitted entirely. Thus, from the early 2000s, the history curriculum begins with the Hellenistic period (fourth to first century BCE) in the Land of Israel, leaving the entire biblical period outside the scope of history studies (MoE, 1995, 2010, 2023b).

In contrast to the sceptical approach of the SE system, in the State Religious Education (SRE) system, the Bible is taught as a sacred text. The SRE serves the Religious Zionist community and operates with educational autonomy, as we will elaborate on in the 'Methods' section below. For many in the Religious Zionist community who study in the SRE, not only is this a text that encompasses many interpretations and dimensions, but it also presents an accurate and unquestionable historical narrative. Unlike historiography, which is prone to subjectivity and flaws, the Bible is considered, at least in many SRE institutions, to be a precise and irrefutable historical account. Nonetheless, even in the SRE, the study of history does not cover the biblical period (MoE, 2023b). One reason for this

separation is the desire of SRE educators to avoid discussions about the reliability of biblical stories that incorporate supernatural elements during lessons that deal with historical thinking tools and disciplinary principles. Therefore, biblical stories are included in a dedicated subject, as well as in other religious subjects such as 'Jewish Thought' and the 'Oral Torah', which are central components of the SRE system.

Beyond the classroom, biblical stories are also an inseparable part of religious life. While the commandments and prayers that shape the fabric of religious life – from dawn until bedtime – are determined according to later rabbinical interpretations, they are derived from the Bible. For example, the main prayer in the three daily prayers, the Amidah, begins with a blessing that acknowledges that our God is the God of our biblical forefathers: 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob', and later refers to the desire to return to Jerusalem as promised in biblical prophecies: 'And to Jerusalem, Your city, in mercy, return, and dwell therein as You have spoken; and build it soon in our days, a structure for all time, and establish the throne of David within it. Blessed are You, O Lord, who builds Jerusalem' (The Metsudah siddur., 1981). This is just one example of how biblical stories are woven into daily religious life and form an integral part of the historical consciousness of the believer.

Despite the Bible's importance and its changing status in Israeli identity, no research has yet examined how attitudes towards the Bible affect the historical understanding of Israeli adolescents. Therefore, our study seeks to investigate the role of biblical stories in the historical significance assigned by young people, and whether, and how, they connect the history of Zionism to the biblical period, contrary to the official curricula.

Methods

Context and participants

In Israel's history education, there are four main education systems: State Education (SE), the State-Religious Education (SRE), the Ultra-Orthodox (UO) and the State-Arab (SA). Each system operates independently and has its own inspectorate, curricula, teaching materials and assessments (Weintraub, 2020, 2023). Our analysis will focus on Israel's two Jewish public education systems: the SE, which serves the non-religious Jewish population, and the SRE, which serves the Religious Zionist community. Together, these systems account for more than 50% of the country's total enrolment (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023). We do not explore the UO system, which is semi-private and unsupervised. Moreover, history is not a core subject in many UO educational institutions, and those that do teach history often rely on religious texts rather than on evidence-based scholarship (Perry-Hazan et al., 2024). The fourth system, the Arab education system, primarily serves Muslim citizens, as well as Christian and Druze populations, and thus requires a completely different analytical framework (Abu-Hussain, 2023).

The research was conducted across 11 Pre-Military Leadership Academies (PMLAs), selected for their ideological-social diversity. PMLAs are voluntary pre-military educational programmes for high school graduates. PMLAs comprise three types: religious, secular and mixed. Religious PMLAs are gender separated, and the research will include both male and female ones. These religious institutions aim to instil religious devotion and love of the Torah, while secular PMLAs promote a pluralistic world view based on humanistic values and tolerance. The mixed PMLAs included cultivate a dialogue and fellowship between secular and religious youths. All PMLAs focus on developing leadership, social values, community involvement and preparing for meaningful military service, with an emphasis on social, Zionist and ethical issues. Therefore, this study does not represent a sample of the entire Israeli population. However, it does represent a diverse group that aspires to establish itself as the elite of Israeli society.

Data collection

Data were collected via an anonymous questionnaire distributed in person in PMLA classrooms in late August and early September 2023. Students received the questionnaire within the first two weeks of their studies to encapsulate their 12 years of study within the governmental education systems. During these initial weeks, the PMLAs focus primarily on administrative aspects and adjusting to new circumstances, minimising their educational impact on the students. Nevertheless, this is a self-selected group of

adolescents who prioritise studying texts and delving into ideological issues before their enlistment in the military. Additionally, the questionnaire was distributed before the Gaza war, so those dramatic events did not influence the students' responses.

Students were informed that the questionnaire was anonymous and intended to help improve history teaching and learning methods in education systems. The questionnaire included several questions examining various aspects of historical understanding and thinking. For this article, we focus on the analysis of two key questions. The first question aimed to examine the students' perception of historical significance, asking them to identify 'What are the five most important events in history, in your opinion?' It was clarified orally to the students that there was no 'right' answer, as the purpose was to explore how they understand and think about history. The second question focused on the Zionist perspective, asking, 'In your opinion, when did Zionism begin?'

Of the 403 students who answered the questionnaire across the 11 PMLAs, 350 graduates of the SE and SRE systems fully answered both questions (201 graduates from the SE and 149 from the SRE). The gender distribution was also balanced, with 50% of respondents identifying as male and 50% as female. There were no respondents who identified as non-binary or gender fluid, and the gender distribution was relatively equal between graduates of both education systems.

Data analysis

We started by coding the questions while ensuring that the students' demographic data were not accessible to us. Regarding the question of historical significance, we coded each event as either a biblical story or not. We then performed a binary analysis to determine whether a student included a biblical event among their five most important events, and we assessed the proportion of biblical events among all the events mentioned by the students. If a student mentioned fewer than five events, the blank event was not counted in the total number of events. It is important to note that historical processes referring to the context in which the Bible was created were not categorised as biblical events, since this reflects a historical understanding of the Bible rather than a faith-based interpretation arising from the biblical texts themselves. For example, if a student mentioned events related to the writing of the Bible or the formation of monotheistic religions, these were not included among the biblical events criteria.

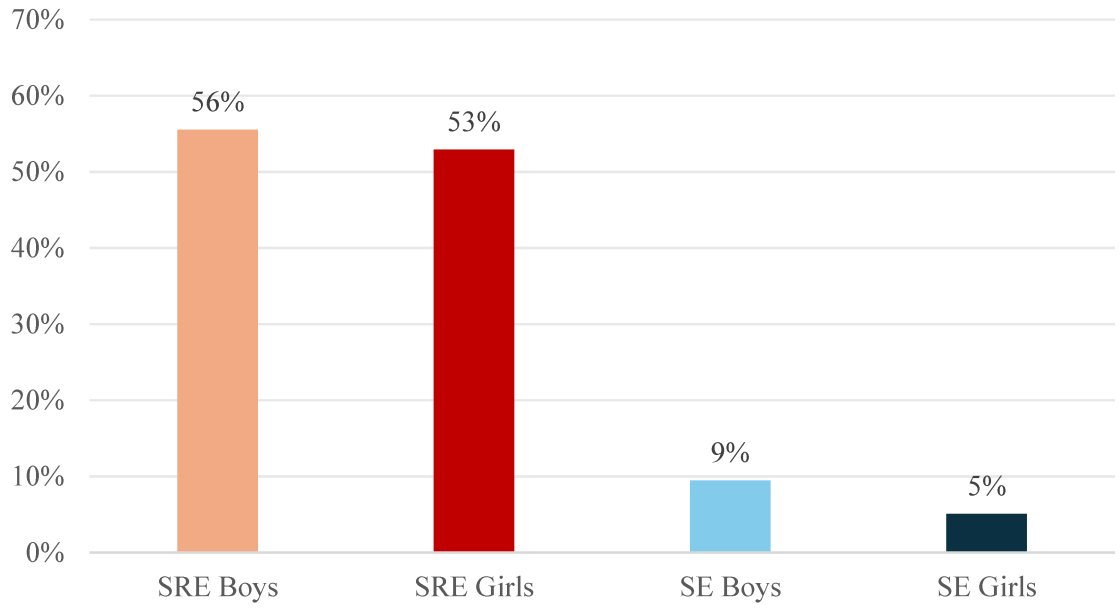
For the question on the beginning of Zionism, the analytical criterion was whether the students referred to an event or process in a period preceding the Babylonian exile. If so, the answer was coded as relating to the biblical period; if not, it was coded as 'non-biblical'. For clarification, even if students attributed the beginning of Zionism to the destruction of the Second Temple or the Roman exile, we did not code this as relating to the biblical period. While these answers contradict the goals of the history curriculum and historical research, they do not pertain to biblical narratives but to a period with extensive historical research. Additionally, students may have mentioned other religious events as the beginning of Zionism; however, this also was not counted as a biblical event. In other words, we only examined whether students attributed the beginning of Zionism to the biblical period, and we did not consider all answers that included other religious elements.

Results

Historical significance of biblical events

Religious and sociocultural backgrounds have a substantial influence on students' attribution of historical significance to biblical events. Among SRE graduates, 86 students, approximately 54%, mentioned one or more biblical events as among the five most important events in history. In contrast, only 7% of SE graduates mentioned a biblical event. A binomial test revealed that this is an exceptionally significant statistical difference ($p < 0.000001$). A gender breakdown of graduates from both education systems (Figure 1) shows no significant difference between male and female students within the SE graduates ($p = 0.081$) or within the SRE graduates ($p = 0.122$).

Figure 1. Percentage of participants who mentioned a biblical event as one of the five most important events in history, by education system and gender



The difference between the education systems was not limited to the binary question of whether a participant mentioned a biblical event; it was evident in the proportion of mentions. Of all the historical events mentioned by SRE graduates, 18% referred to biblical events, compared to only 2% of SE graduates' total events – a stark, statistically significant difference ($p < 0.000001$). This suggests that SE graduates assign minimal historical significance to the Bible, while SRE graduates place considerably greater emphasis on it. On average, an SRE graduate includes one biblical story among the five most important events in history.

Furthermore, examining participants who mentioned at least one biblical event reveals a noticeable difference in the distribution of the number of events mentioned (Figure 2). Most participants mentioned one biblical event, but many SRE graduates mentioned two or more events. This trend was particularly pronounced among male SRE graduates. Approximately 30 per cent of male SRE graduates included at least two biblical events in their list of the five most important historical events. Of these, 11% selected three events, and 1% chose four. It is important to emphasise that these figures do not encompass the full scope of Jewish history or other Jewish-religious events beyond the biblical period. This underscores the exceptional significance male SRE graduates place on biblical events within the broader context of human history.

Itamar, an SRE graduate who took enhanced classes in physics and religious studies in high school, is an example of a student who cited three biblical events, with his two additional selections focusing on modern Jewish history. The five events he listed as the most important in history, in the order he wrote them, were: '(1) the creation of the world; (2) the receiving of the Torah; (3) the Holocaust; (4) the Exodus from Egypt; (5) the establishment of the State [of Israel].' In Religious Zionist thought, both the Holocaust and the founding of Israel hold significant religious importance. This demonstrates the central role that biblical stories play in Itamar's world view, while the two other events he chose also carry immense religious meaning.

At the same time, most students, both in the SRE (66%) and the SE (100%) systems, combined biblical events with historical events that do not hold particular religious significance. For example, Uriah, a male SRE graduate who took enhanced classes in chemistry, listed the following five events: '(1) the World Wars; (2) the Industrial Revolution; (3) the birth of Abraham; (4) Newton's apple; (5) Einstein's theory of relativity'. Uriah focused primarily on global events, particularly those linked to discoveries and technologies, yet still incorporated within them the biblical story of Abraham.

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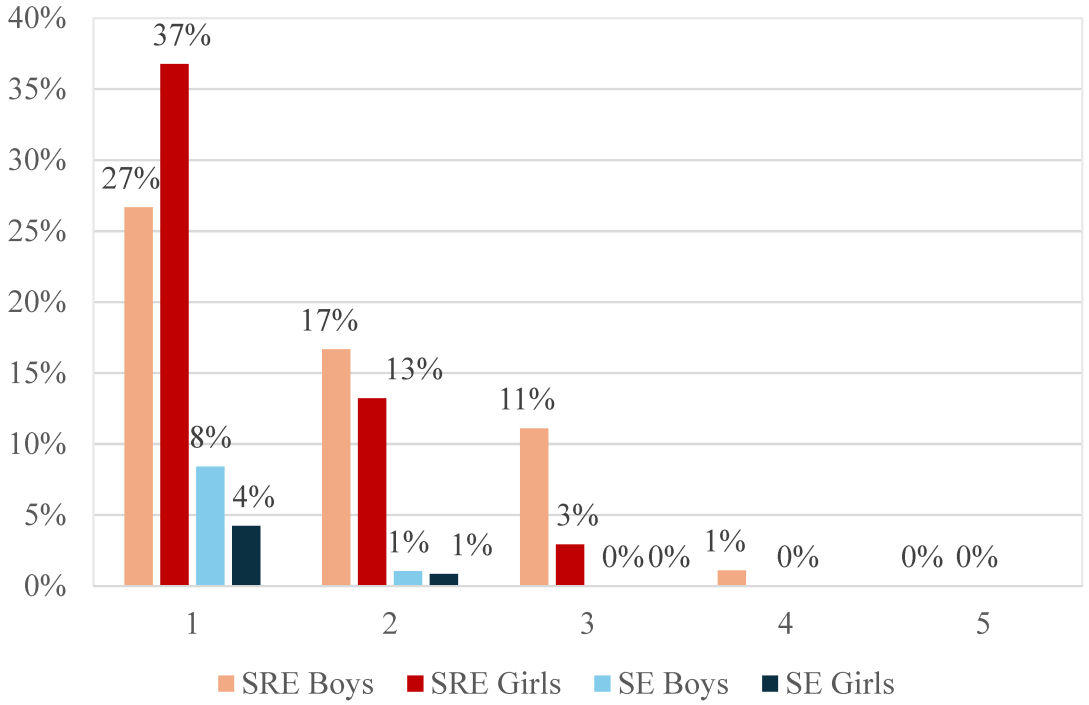
Figure 2. Distribution of the number of references to biblical events among the participants who mentioned at least one biblical event



Sometimes, the additional events mentioned alongside the biblical narratives may actually challenge a straightforward biblical perspective. An example is Shira, a female SE graduate, who cited: '(1) human evolution; (2) the Holocaust; (3) the establishment of the State [of Israel]; (4) Feminism; and (5) the Exodus from Egypt'. Interestingly, Shira's choices reflect a tension – on the one hand, she mentioned the theory of evolution, which could challenge the literal biblical account of creation; on the other hand, she included the Exodus from Egypt, a biblical event that explicitly involves divine intervention. Another example is Nethanel, an SRE graduate, who in his response included: '(1) The Big Bang; (2) The Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; (3) The Beginning of Christianity; (4) World War I; and (5) World War II'. Thus, while Nethanel referred to the biblical story of Mount Sinai as a historical event, he also included the Big Bang, which challenges the literal interpretation of the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis.

Overall, among SRE graduates, the three most commonly mentioned biblical events were: the Creation of the World (31%), the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai (28%) and the Exodus from Egypt (22%). Apart from these, the only other notable references were to the stories of the Hebrew patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – which accounted for 8% of the mentions. Other events were mentioned only sporadically. Among SE graduates, these events were also present, but in a different order. The most frequently mentioned event by SE graduates who referenced the Bible was the Exodus from Egypt (41%), followed by the Creation of the World (35%). The Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai received relatively little attention, similar to the story of the Garden of Eden (Table 1).

Among the biblical events mentioned by the students, the conquest of the Land of Israel by Joshua stood out for its marginal status among SRE students, and its complete absence among SE students. Similarly, students from both systems made no reference to the stories of the kingdoms of David and Solomon. This is particularly telling regarding the non-religious public, highlighting the profound shift in attitudes towards the Bible. In the Zionist movement and during the early decades of the state's establishment, biblical stories were viewed through a secular-cultural lens as a primary source of the Jewish people's connection to the biblical Land of Israel. The struggle for the establishment of the State of Israel was often placed alongside Joshua's military campaigns and other historical struggles in Jewish history. In contrast, the vast majority of SE graduates did not refer to the Bible at all and specifically avoided mentioning military-political events that do not necessarily require belief in divine intervention.

Instead, they focused on events that explicitly involve divine action, such as the Creation of the World and the Exodus from Egypt.

Table 1. Adolescents' choices of biblical events as one of the most important events in history

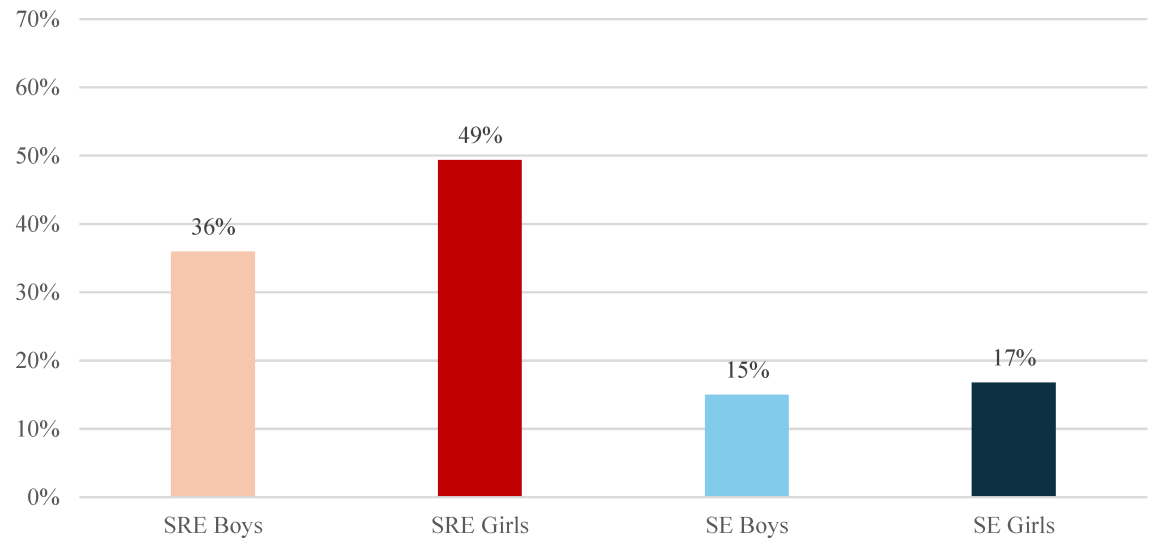
Event	Number of times mentioned by graduate of SRE/SE		
	Total	SRE	SE
The Creation of the World	48	42	6
Moses on Mount Sinai	40	38	2
Exodus from Egypt	37	30	7
Abraham and the Patriarchs	11	11	0
Garden of Eden	6	4	2
Noah's Ark	4	4	0
Solomon's Temple	3	3	0
Tower of Babel	2	2	0
Joshua Conquest of Canaan	2	2	0

The biblical era as the beginning of Zionism

Although the Bible is not taught as the beginning of Zionism in the history curriculum, many graduates perceive it as such. Approximately 27% of the graduates from both education systems referred to the biblical period as the start of Zionism; 16% referred exclusively to it, while 11% stated that Zionism began in the biblical period and gained significant momentum again in the nineteen or twentieth century.

Differences between the graduates of the two education systems were also evident in this answer. Among SRE graduates, about 42% of participants referred to the biblical period, compared to 16% of SE graduates. Despite the differences between the systems, it is noteworthy that a considerable percentage of SE graduates referred to the Bible in response to these fundamental questions about their historical understanding. Regarding gender, the results among SE graduates were almost identical, with 15% of male SE graduates referring to the Bible as the beginning of Zionism, compared to 17% of female SE graduates. Among SRE graduates, there was a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.007$), with about 49% of female graduates referring to the Bible as the beginning of Zionism, compared to 36% of male graduates (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of participants who mentioned the biblical era as the beginning of Zionism



The answers identifying the Bible as the beginning of Zionism included three main types: Zionism as an eternal concept inherent in the Jewish people from creation or time immemorial (31%), God's promise of the Land of Israel to Abraham (20%) and a general reference to the biblical period (20%). Unlike SRE graduates, SE graduates gave relatively little importance to the divine promise to Abraham, with only two participants mentioning it. Instead, SE graduates gave relatively central importance to the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Thus, although SE graduates did not refer to the divine promise to Abraham, they still elected an event in which divine intervention is a key element (Table 2).

Table 2. Adolescents' choices of biblical events as the beginning of Zionism

Event or period	Number of times mentioned by graduate of SRE/SE		
	All	SRE	SE
Eternal/Since the Creation of the World	33	18	15
God's Promise to Abraham	21	19	2
'Biblical Era'	21	11	10
The Babylonian Exile	16	13	3
Exodus from Egypt	15	8	7

A significant number of students identified the Bible as the starting point of Zionism while also emphasising its resurgence in the modern era. This is evident, for example, in the response of Yarden, a female SE graduate:

> I have two aspects regarding this question. Zionism started in the Bible when the people were led to the Land of Canaan (Israel) during the time of Moses – it wasn't by chance that they wandered for 40 years. Another aspect is when many countries began forming their national identities, and antisemitism started. When we felt unsafe in our place, we began forming our identity, and along the way, Zionism emerged. That's the main reason.

In line with the history curriculum, Yarden highlighted that Zionism is a result of modern nationalism and the failure of Jews to integrate safely and fairly into European societies. However, at the same time, she emphasised that Zionism has an earlier history, tied to the Israelites' journey through the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. While Yarden does not explicitly refer to divine providence, she does mention the Israelites' 40-year journey in the desert, as described in the Bible. According to the biblical narrative, this period is explained as a divine punishment for the Israelites' lack of faith, and God provided them with food from heaven throughout their journey. Thus, without the divine element, Yarden's reference to 40 years of wandering raises many questions about the reasons for such a prolonged journey and how the Israelites managed to survive.

As mentioned, the common reference by graduates of both education systems to the biblical period contradicts the goals of the history curriculum and official teaching materials, both in SE and SRE. Some graduates explicitly referred to this dissonance. For example, Noga, an SRE graduate who studied in an *ulpana* (a religious boarding school for high school-aged girls), wrote:

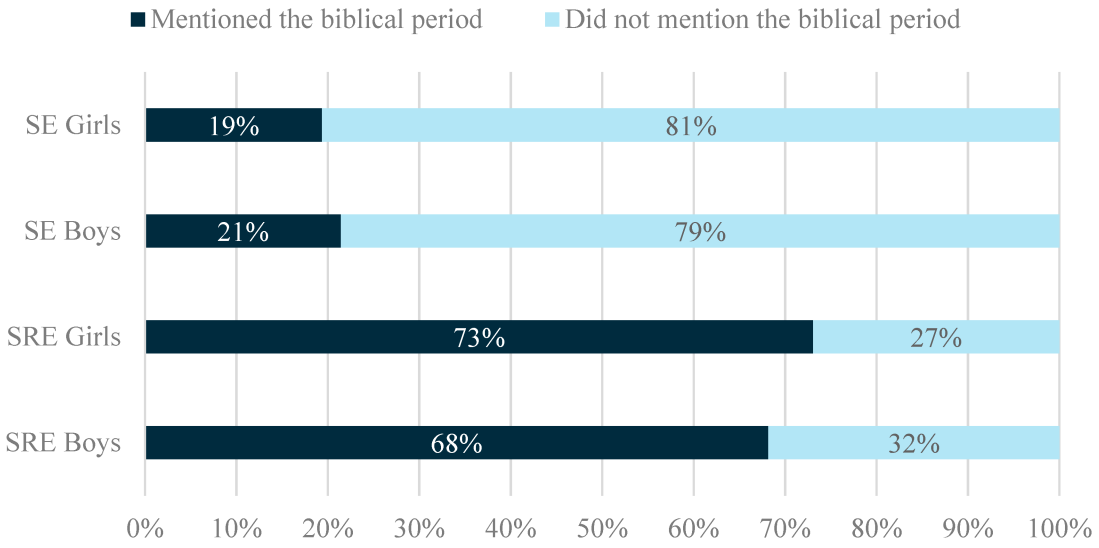
> If you look at the material I learnt in high school, Zionism began with the precursors of Zionism [mid-nineteenth century], but in my opinion, it starts with our forefather Abraham when he arrived in the land, and from there, throughout history, there was a connection and desire to reach and settle the Land of Israel.

Noga, who pointed to the divine promise to Abraham as the beginning of Zionism, felt that it was important to note that she was aware that her historical stance contradicted the history lessons she had learnt in the educational institution, which she had completed just two months earlier. Although Abraham was not mentioned in her history classes, it is clear that Noga adopted this perspective through various contexts and circumstances – from religious studies at school, through religious life, to religious lessons in different frameworks.

Proportion of participants who referred to the Bible

In both education systems, many of the participants referred to the biblical period in only one of the two questions. To evaluate the proportion of participants who considered the Bible to be a historical event and its prevalence in their historical understanding, we conducted a binary analysis to identify whether students mentioned the biblical era in at least one of the questions. The analysis revealed that 70% of SRE graduates referred to the biblical period in at least one response. Among SE graduates, despite their seemingly secular background, approximately 20% referred to the Bible in these questions, which are central to their historical understanding (Figure 4). This finding underscores the Bible's importance in the world view of students from both systems. At the same time, it also highlights the large differences between the systems, which were highly statistically significant ($p < 0.000001$). Also in this analysis, gender differences within the systems were negligible and not close to significant ($p = 0.179$ for SRE and $p = 0.328$ for SE). The education system, or the students' religious, social and educational background, was the most definitive explanatory variable.

Figure 4. The proportion of participants who referred to the biblical period in at least one of the questions



Of all the SRE graduates who mentioned the Bible in one of the questions, 39% referenced the Bible in both questions. Another 40% referred to the Bible only in the question about the five most important events in history and 21% mentioned it only in the question about the beginning of Zionism. Among SE graduates, only 10% of those who mentioned the Bible did so in both questions, with the vast majority – around 66% – referencing it solely in the question about the origins of Zionism.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that among SRE graduates, there is a connection between mentioning a biblical story among five of the most important events and a higher likelihood of referencing the Bible as the beginning of Zionism. This finding was only marginally significant ($\chi^2 = 3.9$, $p = 0.0486$). Among SE graduates, however, there was no such association ($\chi^2 = 2$, $p = 0.157$). The lack of correlation among SE graduates' answers suggests that their minimal reference to the Bible does not necessarily indicate that they do not view biblical stories as historical events, but rather that they attribute less importance to them.

Discussion

The Bible is one of the most influential texts in human history, shaping civilisations, moral frameworks and cultural identities over centuries. Its narratives, laws and teachings have guided religious practice for billions, and have played a pivotal role in developing art, literature, philosophy and governance. Its

interpretations have sparked debates, inspired revolutions, and informed the ethical and moral discourse that underpins much of Western thought.

As the foundational text of the Jewish people, its significance in Jewish Israeli culture is unsurprising. However, our article shows that the Bible's importance is not merely spiritual or cultural; it is integral to the historical understanding of many of Israel's education system graduates. Our study, therefore, contributes to the research about history education in two key areas: (1) how history education is shaped outside of history lessons; and (2) how religious identity affects historical significance. Additionally, the findings offer new insights into the post-secular nature of non-religious society in Israel and highlight the need to address the religious dimension in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

First, biblical stories exemplify how religious and cultural contexts shape history education beyond formal lessons in education systems (Kisler, 2020). Despite the absence of biblical stories from history lessons and their controversial historical status, our research shows that they are, in fact, a cornerstone of students' historical understanding. In certain instances, such as students' perceptions of the beginning of Zionism, the Bible was not only central to their historical understanding; it even took precedence over the central goals of the curriculum, which focus on the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century. Some students consciously chose biblical stories as the starting point of Zionism, fully aware that their history lessons presented a different narrative.

The findings of the study align with previous research highlighting how students' identities and cultural surroundings influence their historical thinking (An, 2009; Epstein, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011; Peck, 2010). At the same time, our study is among the first to empirically demonstrate the profound impact of religious identity on students' historical significance. While Barton's (2005) study on Northern Ireland showed no substantial differences in selecting significant events in Irish history, only in their reasoning, our research reveals substantial differences between the religious and the non-religious Jewish public education system. Our findings show that the differences between graduates of the two systems are not limited to a greater emphasis on religious topics or figures but reflect significant disparities in the cognitive frameworks shaping students' world views. In contrast, the gender differences observed in our study were marginal and mostly not statistically significant.

The significant differences between the historical understanding and significance of SE and SRE systems further support the insights of divergent trends in the history education of SE and SRE, and the importance of analysing them separately (Tal, 2024; Weintraub and Gibson, 2025; Weintraub et al., 2022). Additionally, while Barton's (2005) study examined two populations with different religious identities but did not consider the level of religious devotion, our research shows that even within a uniformly Jewish population, the level of religious belief significantly impacts students' historical thinking. In this sense, our study highlights the importance of examining not only students' religious background but also the degree of their religious devotion. In this context, the research findings also highlight the religious diversity among SRE graduates, with almost one third of them not referencing the biblical era at all. This aligns with previous studies on the variations in historical perceptions within SRE (Gross, 2025; Weintraub, 2020), as well as with the notable phenomenon of SRE graduates who discontinue religious observance (Herman et al., 2014; Rosner and Fuchs, 2018).

The role of the Bible among SE graduates underscores the importance of moving beyond a dichotomous view of religious and secular identities, especially in non-Western-Christian contexts (Asad, 2003; McLennan, 2010). The research shows that biblical stories significantly influence a substantial portion of SE graduates, even though they do not consider themselves religious or observe religious practices. SE graduates do not observe the commandments, nor have they undergone the socialisation of religious society. Some of them, however, still regard the biblical stories that involve explicit divine intervention in human affairs – such as the creation of the world or the Exodus from Egypt – as actual historical events. It is also important to note that more SE graduates may attribute historical reality to biblical stories, but this is not reflected in the two questions examined in this article, which only indicate whether the Bible is a central part of students' understanding, being in tension with the objectives of the official curriculum. This phenomenon aligns with a significant portion of the non-religious Jewish population who identify as traditionists ('masortim' in Hebrew) – people who maintain a connection to, and respect for, Jewish beliefs, customs and practices, even though they do not adhere to formal religious observance (Yadgar, 2011). Ultimately, these findings underscore the powerful influence of the surrounding historical culture and how historical perceptions permeate students in various ways outside of the classroom.

This study also highlights the need to consider the religious dimension when exploring different historical understandings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For many Jewish Israeli adolescents, the perception that biblical stories are actual historical events can profoundly shape how they understand the Jewish people's connection to the Land of Israel and influence their attitudes towards the Palestinian population. For instance, if an individual views the divine promise of the land to Abraham as a real historical event, this perception imbues the connection between the Jewish people and the land with not only historical, but also with religious and spiritual, significance. In other words, while the Bible is neither explicitly affirmed nor denied in school history lessons, it often plays a meaningful role in students' historical understanding. This understanding can have far-reaching consequences for how Israelis perceive the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a violent, ongoing struggle in which they will engage, first as soldiers and later as adults living in a reality shaped by existential threats at both national and regional levels.

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Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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