



Bible Babel

By Kristin Swenson
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Introduction

Bible Babel, from author and religious studies professor Kristin Swenson, is a lively, humorous, and very readable introduction to the Bible—what's in it, where it comes from, and how it is used in our culture today. If you've ever wondered about the origin of the Christian fish symbol; the history of the Good Book; how the Bible weighs in on contemporary political issues; or even the biblical source of pop-culture references in *WALL-E* or *Battlestar Galatica*, then this is the book for you. Readers of A. J. Jacobs's *Year of Living Biblically* and David Plotz's *Good Book* will enjoy *Bible Babel*, a perfect primer for anyone interested in the Bible—secular and believing alike.

From the Author

Unlike most other kinds of reading and learning, there are two distinct approaches people bring to the Bible—devotional/religious, and . . . well . . . not. I call the second kind (treating the Bible as a historic and literary document of extraordinary cultural influence) "academic." It doesn't, however, require a professor or even a passing relationship with college. It simply requires some curiosity. While the first kind of readers, for whom the Bible is their sacred text, benefit from the second (academic) kind of reading, it doesn't necessarily work the other way. The second kind of readers don't have to "believe in" the Bible in order to understand a lot about it. For example, no matter what a person believes about God, the Bible is organized as a collection of books, Genesis is the first to appear in the collection, and the Christian Bible has more books than the Jewish Bible.

Bible Babel doesn't require of its readers any particular religious position or beliefs, so this guide won't either. That said, matters of faith and belief add another dimension to reading and learning about the Bible that make for great discussion material. So, I'll include questions and reflections that I hope people who read the Bible devotionally will find intriguing, helpful, and maybe sometimes challenging. I've organized the guide as a series of questions with a sentence or two of lead-in information. They fit (admittedly sometimes indirectly) with the material of the book's chapters, so that's how they're arranged. The questions are just suggestions. Let them take you on tangents and in new directions. If you're reading with a group, you might include some time for each member to answer these general questions: what was your favorite part of the chapter? What did you find most challenging? What most intriguing? If you're working with a religious group, you might include: How does reading about these things make you think or rethink ideas about God or the Bible? Is such learning about the Bible enriching or problematic for your faith? Perhaps a little of both? Share your thoughts with others.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Bible is everywhere—in churches and synagogues of course, but also in movies, music, paintings, and politics. Many people have strong opinions about the Bible and immediate reactions to any mention of it. What was your response to the idea of reading a book about the Bible? What are some of the reactions that others have expressed in learning that you're reading a book about the Bible? What assumptions, your own and others, do such responses suggest?
2. How does knowing "that the Bible was composed over a long period of time by many different people, and all of it a long time ago" affect the ways that you think about the Bible?
3. The author notes that Jews and Christians and different kinds of Christians have different Bibles; but there are strong similarities between them, too. How might or do these similarities and differences affect the relationships between different religious communities?
4. It's a rare thing for any history to be impartial and complete. When the Bible tells history, it does so in light of particular religious concerns. What does it mean for us as readers, then, to take it at face value? What can we learn and what remains a question?
5. Discuss some of the ways that these, two historical events shaped the Bible: a) The Babylonians' capture of Judah, destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and exile of some Judeans; and b) The life and death of Jesus? As you respond and listen to others, observe the difference between faith-based and secular readings—for example, the difference between "God was punishing the Jews for their idolatry" and "the biblical writers interpreted their defeat as the direct doing of their God." How has the fact that the Bible has come to us as a single book, sacred and authoritative influenced the way we read it?
6. What does it matter that there are two different stories of creation at the beginning of the Bible, and that they appear back-to-back without separate headings or authors' signatures?
7. What are your experiences with translation, from learning another language to making sense of our own? What do you think is the best biblical translation and why?
8. In "We've Got Issues," we read "For some persons of faith, appealing to biblical authority means seeking out and applying general precepts such as loving God and caring for others to specific issues that, in some cases, the word of the Bible may actually oppose. For others, specific texts trump such general ideas." Why would a person choose one approach over the other? What problems with each might exist?
9. Have you recently seen or heard the Bible quoted outside of a religious context—in popular or classical culture? How did its new context

affect your hearing or reading of it? What is your favorite (or most memorable) verse or passage?

10. Which male biblical character would you most like to meet, and why?

11. What difference do the patriarchal contexts of the biblical texts make to the ways that we read about women, both for understanding the characters and for how people think about the value and roles of women today?

12. Does learning about the development of the Hebrew word *satan* to the being named Satan affect the way that you think about evil? How about *malak* to "angel"?

13. Have you ever visited the Middle East? If so, what struck you in particular? If not, what would you especially like to see and why?

14. If you had to draw a picture of God, what would it look like? Can you say what led you to or informed such an image?

15. How do you see the Bible's different names and descriptions of God influencing people's theologies today? What is most compelling or problematic about this variety for you?

16. In the book's conclusion, the author observes, "information about the Bible, such as this book seeks to provide, goes only so far. When it comes to interpreting and using biblical texts, people's individual experiences, family histories, cultural contexts, and faith traditions shape how they treat such information." What do you think are the two most important things for people to know about the Bible?

About the Author

Kristin Swenson, author of *Living through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness* and *What is Religious Studies?: A Journey of Inquiry* (with Esther R. Nelson), is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota, Kristin studied biology at St. Olaf College ' a small, liberal arts Lutheran college in the warmer climes of southern Minnesota.

After traveling to the Middle East one semester, she added a religious studies major but continued to focus on the sciences. Kristin worked with a paleo-pathologist for a couple of summers, and later for a semester in a Univ. of MN pathology lab, studying wound healing. After graduation, she shifted her focus to religious studies, earning her Masters and Ph.D. degrees at Boston University in "the history and literature of ancient Israel." Kristin has been teaching religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University for over a decade and recently earned tenure. There she teaches about the Bible and religion, in general, to people of all ages, ethnicities, religions, and levels of expertise. She lives in Richmond, Virginia in a hundred-year-old house with a hundred-pound pound hound and tiny alley cat.