

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Cities That Built the Bible

by

Robert R. Cargill

INTRODUCTION

1. On page 1 of this book, Robert Cargill asks, “Where did the Bible come from?” How would you answer this question? Who taught you how to answer it? What beliefs about and knowledge of the Bible do you bring to reading this book?
2. When reading a novel, we often see how a book’s setting affects the characters and perhaps even the outcome of the plot. Have you ever thought about how the physical locations in which the stories of the Bible are set may have an impact on how we read and understand them? If not, what do you make of this idea?

3. Cargill encourages his readers to do him “a favor by not just reading the information presented in this book, but challenging it” (p. 11). Do you think you can approach this topic critically? What do you bring with you as you start this book?

CHAPTER 1 PHOENICIAN CITIES

1. “Phoenicians are ultimately responsible for the literary raw materials—paper and alphabet—used to write the Bible” (p. 21). Before reading this chapter, had you heard of the area that made up Phoenicia? How have these simple materials shaped the Bible?
2. At the beginning of this chapter, Cargill explores the importance of written texts vs. oral traditions, namely that writing down a tradition allows the words to have a life beyond the person telling the story. When the sacred stories began to be recorded in writing, how did this change the way Jewish and later Christian traditions would develop?
3. According to Cargill, why is Jesus “always quoted in the Gospels as having spoken Aramaic” (p. 21)? What is the history there? (Hint: see chapter 4).

CHAPTER 2 UGARIT

1. “Some readers are surprised to learn that many of the stories found in the Bible were often inspired by *earlier* stories about characters and gods from *other* cultures” (p. 34). Before reading this chapter, were you aware of this? How does knowing this impact your view of the Bible?
2. On pages 34–46, Cargill describes Ugaritic gods and stories that likely influenced early Israel’s view of God and its holy texts. Which of these Ugaritic gods or stories stands out to you? Which, in your opinion, had the greatest impact on the Bible?
3. What do you make of the distinction Cargill draws between “monolatry” and “monotheism” (p. 49)? What do you make of Israel’s attempt to fight the surrounding polytheism by redefining “the names of [Ugaritic] deities as alternative epithets for YHWH” (p. 51)? If you grew up in a church or synagogue, does this align with or challenge what you were taught?

CHAPTER 3 NINEVEH

1. For Cargill, “Nineveh is partly responsible for the composition and the preservation of the Bible’s anti-Northern Kingdom, anti-Samaritan theology” (p. 57). How has this “theology” shaped the Bible?

2. How would you describe the impact of the city of Nineveh on the imaginations of the prophets Jonah, Zephaniah, and Nahum (pp. 64–68)?
3. Cargill claims that Nineveh “allowed for the elevation of Jerusalem as the inviolable city of God” (p. 69). What events transpired that caused the people of Jerusalem to view their city as divinely protected?

CHAPTER 4 BABYLON

1. What words or images come to mind when you hear the word “Babylon”? (p. 72). Why is that?
2. On pages 72–75, Cargill recounts a story of being on an archeological dig during which he came to terms with “what Babylon brought to Judah—destruction, death, and sorrow” (p. 75). How does his story help you understand what Babylon represented to the people of Israel, both during and after the exile?
3. “Babylon, despite its place in history as the city that destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple of YHWH, remained a place of Jewish learning throughout the first centuries of the common era” (p. 98). How was it a central place of learning? What’s the significance?

CHAPTER 5 MEGIDDO

1. “It should come as no surprise,” writes Cargill, “that when John of Patmos wished to record his vision of a great apocalyptic battle between good and evil, he chose the location of *Har Megiddo* to symbolize this final apocalyptic battle” (pp. 107–108). What does *Har Megiddo* refer to? Why does John associate the apocalyptic battle with the town of Megiddo?
2. Cargill draws a parallel between the Armageddon described in the book of Revelation and other “Armageddons,” or great battles, from history: Thermopylae, Little Bighorn, the Alamo, and Waterloo (p. 108). Does drawing this parallel help you more fully understand the importance of Megiddo as a town and a setting for eschatological events?
3. “Megiddo is the symbol of [the final] victory that inspired early Christians to write down the traditions of their faith and inspires all Christians since then to keep the faith until God returns” (p. 109). What are your beliefs about the end times as set forth in Revelation? Is Megiddo, as a symbol of final Christian victory, something that inspires you? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 6 ATHENS

1. Cargill describes the main philosophical schools of ancient Greece that influenced the Bible (pp. 119–122). In your opinion, which of these seem to have had the greatest influence? Were you aware of this influence?
2. “The idea of an independent soul . . . that exists apart from the body is a Greek contribution to very late Jewish and then Christian theology” (p. 125). What do you believe happens when you die? Does the answer to this question change from the Old Testament to the New Testament? Is your answer based on what the Apostle Paul says, or could it be influenced by Greek concepts about the afterlife?
3. “Athens is far more important to the Bible than the few brief mentions within its pages” (p. 133). Of all of the ways Athens shaped the Bible, what is one in particular that stood out to you? Why?

CHAPTER 7 ALEXANDRIA

1. The city of Alexandria is never mentioned in the Old Testament and only mentioned in passing in the New Testament, so why is it included in this book about the cities that built the Bible?
2. In your own words, what is the significance of the *Letter of Aristeas*, a forged document from the second cen-

ture CE aimed to get Jews to accept the new Greek Bible? How would you describe the impact it had on the Bible (pp. 140–145)?

3. Cargill mentions the discrepancies between the original Hebrew Scriptures and the Septuagint (pp. 145–153). What do you make of these discrepancies? What is at stake when there are discrepancies in sacred texts?
4. Before reading this chapter, how familiar were you with the books of the Apocrypha? Why is that?

CHAPTER 8 JERUSALEM

1. On pages 173–177, Cargill presents the conflicting biblical accounts of how the Israelites came to inhabit Jerusalem. How do you personally make sense of these different accounts? Why do you think they were both preserved in the Bible?
2. How did the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE impact the development of the Bible?
3. Which mention of the city of Jerusalem in the Bible is most impactful for you? How might your faith community inform that choice?
4. How did Jerusalem become “Jerusalem”? What events led Jerusalem to becoming the holy city it is today?

CHAPTER 9 QUMRAN

1. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls “signaled the beginning of the end for . . . ‘biblical inerrancy,’ which is the notion that the Bible is the perfect, verbatim, inerrant, noncontradictory Word of God” (p. 195). How do you and/or your faith community view “biblical inerrancy”? Why? How does the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls affect this view, if at all?
2. “The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls caused shock waves throughout the world of biblical studies because they not only changed the way we read the Bible; they quite literally changed what the Bible says!” (p. 209). Do these changes threaten your view of the authority of the Bible? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 10 BETHLEHEM AND NAZARETH

1. “There is an important difference between a traditional pilgrimage site and an archeological site” (p. 218). According to Cargill, how can a site lacking archeological evidence become a pilgrimage site? How does learning more about the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem help us understand this phenomenon?
2. Which biblical account of Jesus’s birth are you most familiar with—Matthew or Luke? Why is that?

3. Writing about how Matthew and Luke crafted their accounts of Jesus's birth to appeal to different audiences, Cargill says, "The Gospels are not meant to be harmonized! Rather, the Gospels are different perspectives from different authors for different audiences that reflect different traditions concerning Jesus's life" (p. 232). Is this how you were taught to read and understand the Gospels? Why or why not? How might this be a freeing perspective, especially when it comes to grappling with the above differences?

CHAPTER 11

ROME

1. Cargill claims that the division of Herod's kingdom after Herod's death "had a huge impact on the daily lives of Jews under Roman rule. This is the period in Jewish and Roman history—the first and early second centuries CE—that contributed the entirety of the New Testament to the Bible" (p. 245). What is one thing that you learned about this period from reading more about it on pages 245–247? What's the significance?
2. "The canon of the Bible came after the church fathers had debated and decided what Christians were supposed to believe" (p. 256). Before reading this chapter, were you aware of this? Either way, how does it affect your view of the Bible? How does it affect your view of doctrine/theology?

3. In your own words, how would you describe the canonization process for the books of the Bible? How did we get the books we have today, and why were certain books left out?

CONCLUSION

1. The goal of this book is to help readers understand that “a number of different cities in and around the Holy Land played significant roles in the construction of the Bible” (p. 263). Which city’s history and contribution to the Bible surprised you the most? How has reading this enriched your view of the Bible? How has reading it challenged your view of the Bible?