

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *What Is the Bible?*

by

Rob Bell

1. There are lots of ways to come at reading the Bible; Rob Bell lists a couple of them: fairy tale, inspired sacred text, or his preference, a library of books dealing with diverse topics. How do you view the Bible? Why? Has how you read the Bible changed over the years?
2. The Bible is “a book about *them, then*, that somehow speaks to you and me, *here and now*, and it can change the way you think and feel about everything” (p. 15). In what ways do the time period and location of the Bible matter to how we read it here, today?
3. “The Bible did not drop out of the sky; it was written by people” (p. 19). Take a moment to think about this, and think about what we expect from contemporary authors when we read their books. How might the fact that people wrote the Bible change the way you view

the authors of the Bible? How might this change the way you view the Bible itself?

4. “It never ends when you’re reading the Bible—you dive in and discover there’s a whole world of depth and intrigue and innuendo and story just below the surface. There’s always something more going on” (p. 38). Describe a time when you’ve discovered greater depth below the surface of a story while reading the Bible.
5. “Just coming up with a translation of the Bible in a particular language involves making thousands of decisions about what words you’re going to use” (p. 46). How does the Greek word *anakephalaioisathai* help illustrate this claim? How does it speak to the idea, again, that there’s more happening beneath the surface of these words than most of us realize?
6. “There’s an arc, a trajectory, a movement to the book of Acts that you only see if you fly at a higher altitude, reading the book as a continuous narrative” (p. 48). Have you ever read a book of the Bible from start to finish in one sitting? How might doing so impact how you read and interpret that book?
7. For Rob, “the Jesus message is first and foremost an announcement of who you are. It’s about your identity, about the new word that has been spoken about you, the love that has always been yours” (p. 51). What would you call your “Jesus message”? If it differs from Rob’s description, how so?

8. What are the new understandings of both God and “what it means to be human” that Rob suggests are introduced in Abraham’s story (p. 63)?
9. “When you read the Bible, one of the things you are paying attention to is the larger patterns, the things that repeat” (p. 69). In your own reading of the Bible, what patterns do you see repeating? How do those patterns relate to each other? How do those patterns inform how you interpret individual passages?
10. “Worry is lethal to thriving because it’s a failure to be fully present. . . . Jesus teaches us to be fully present in this moment, not missing a thing right here, right now” (p. 72). How does your worrying affect your ability to be fully present?
11. Describe the difference between reading the Bible “literally” and “*literately*” (p. 80). Why does Rob support the latter? What do you think about a “literate” reading of the Bible?
12. Rob refers to the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis as both primitive and progressive. How can it be both? Have you read this story in this way before? What stands out to you about it now?
13. Have you ever felt like you need to “reject all inexplicable elements of all stories” in your quest for truth (p. 104)? What is at stake when we do this?
14. Prior to reading pages 107–112, how did you interpret the story in which God calls Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? How does Rob’s interpretation of this story

inform your own? How might it challenge it? How might it enrich it?

15. “When you read the Bible, then, you read it as an unfolding story. You don’t edit out the earlier bits or pretend like they’re not there; they reflect how people understood things in that time in that place. You read the stories in light of where they’re headed” (p. 117). What do you make of Rob’s argument up to this point about this way of approaching the Bible?
16. “What you find in the Bible are stories accurately reflecting the dominant consciousness of the day, and yet right in among and sometimes even within those very same violent stories, you find radically new ideas about freedom, equality, justice, compassion, and love” (p. 123). How might these “radically new ideas” help you see the Bible’s violent passages in a new way? Does Rob’s explanation help you make sense of violence in the Bible, or not?
17. What does Rob mean by reading the Bible “as a flat line” (p. 129)? Why does he caution against this kind of reading? What does he suggest instead? Why are the “earlier bits”—though often harder to understand—important?
18. Rob asks a series of questions about what God values: “How open are you to what Spirit is doing in this moment? How receptive is your heart to a fresh word about grace? Are you hungry to learn, to grow, to be transformed? Do you want to see things in a new way?” (p. 137). How would you answer these questions?

19. What, according to Rob, is the point of the Good Samaritan story (p. 139)?
20. Rob explores how Jesus read the Bible by unpacking three words: “*interpretation, incarnation, and invitation*” (p. 151). What does he mean by each? Which brought a fresh insight to your own understanding of and approach to the Bible?
21. “It’s possible to resist the very growth and change and expanding consciousness that God desires for you by appealing to your religious convictions” (p. 165). How might this dynamic play out in your life?
22. “All things are yours,” writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 (p. 169). Rob says we should make this our mantra. If you did, what would this look like in your life?
23. “Why do the four resurrection accounts in the Gospels differ on basic details? Why aren’t there any clear denunciations of polygamy? Or slavery? Why does Paul say in the New Testament that it’s him speaking, *not the Lord?*” (p. 188). Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered those questions? How might Rob help you answer them differently now?
24. Rob uses the lyrics of Nirvana’s song “Smells Like Teen Spirit” to shed new light on how to understand and approach the book of Revelation (pp. 208–210). What did you learn from this?
25. “The power of the Bible for people like us living in times like these is that it shows us what it looks like to resist what needs to be resisted and critique what needs

to be critiqued while holding on to the conviction that there is a sacred mystery at the heart of being human” (p. 215). What might the Bible be calling you to resist or critique here in the United States? Why?

26. Rob writes, “To the original audience of these stories and the genealogies in them, those lists weren’t boring; they were inspiring. *God uses nobodies*” (p. 227). If God can use anybody, then how could God use you—today, tomorrow, next week, next year?
27. “This God is different. You can come near to this God. You can relate to this God” (p. 230). Did you expect to learn this lesson from Leviticus? Do you feel like you can draw near to and/or relate to God? Why?
28. “Can you see why questions like *Why did God do it that way?* will never give you satisfying answers? It’s the wrong question, which will always result in an unsatisfying answer” (p. 244). Why is this the wrong question? And how does it relate to understanding Jesus’s death?
29. If you were taught about them, what were you taught about election and predestination (p. 252)? Were they narrow or expanding actions? How does this chapter impact your current thinking about these important biblical concepts?
30. What do you make of Rob’s engagement with the concept of wrath in chapter 34?
31. “Sin is anything we do to disrupt the peace and harmony God desires for the world” (p. 260). Compare

and contrast this definition of sin with your own and what you've been taught.

32. Rob defines the word of God as: "The creative action of God speaking in and through the world, bringing new creation and new life into being" (p. 266). Where and how does the Bible, the written word of God, fit into this definition?
33. Rob talks about how the authority of the Bible is a "relational reality" (p. 271). What does he mean by this? How do you see this "relational reality" play out in your faith community? In your own life?
34. What does Rob mean by the Bible's "growing and shifting thinking" (p. 277)?
35. "Is the sunset without error? Is the love between you and the person you're in love with without error? Is the best meal you've ever eaten without error?" (p. 282). Why does Rob ask these questions? What point do they make related to the concept of inerrancy?
36. "The Bible is a library of books, written by people trying to figure it out, wrestling with their demons, doubting, struggling, doing what they could to bring a little light to their world, and yet these books have been breathed into, showing us what redemption looks like, giving us hope, insisting that people like you and me can actually do our part to heal, repair, and restore this world we call home" (p. 287). Does this statement give you hope? Make you uneasy? Something else? Discuss.

37. Rob suggests that people ask as they read the Bible: “Why did people find this important to write down?” (p. 289). Would asking this question of both specific passages and the Bible as a whole change how you read and interpret the Bible? How so? Another question to ask is: “Why did this passage endure?” (p. 299). Why is this a helpful question?
38. Why is “Why did God . . .” such a bad way to start a question about the Bible (p. 293)? What do you make of Rob’s argument here?
39. Describe how you viewed the Bible before reading this book. Describe how you now view the Bible after reading this book. How do these approaches compare? What has changed? What has stayed the same?
40. If you could share one idea that you learned from this book with a friend, what would you share? Why?