

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

How to Read the Bible

by

Harvey Cox

INTRODUCTION

1. Harvey Cox describes his own personal history with the Bible as unfolding in three stages: the “narrative” stage, the “historical” stage, and the “spiritual” stage (p. 2). What is your personal history with the Bible? Can you relate to any of Cox’s stages? Would you include any stages of your own?
2. “We all go to the Bible *looking for something*, and what we are looking for is shaped by who we are, how old we are, our class, the racial and gender composition of our society, and even the temperament of the era in which we live” (pp. 12–13). What has shaped your own approach to the Bible? Are you aware of how these and other factors affect your reading of scripture?

3. In this book, Cox aims to build a bridge between “Bible study” and “biblical studies” (p. 14). On what side of this bridge do you see yourself? What do you know about people on the other side? What might you learn from them?

SERPENTS, FLOODS, AND THE MYSTERY OF EVIL: THE BOOK OF GENESIS

1. According to Cox, myth is “a narrative that, although not necessarily factually accurate, is nonetheless true in a deeper and more significant sense” (p. 25). How would you define the word “myth”? What do you think of Cox’s definition? How might his definition help you approach the book of Genesis in a fresh way?
2. Cox suggests that the authors of Genesis were not “trying to formulate a proto-scientific theory of how the universe came into being or how the various species of animals appeared” (p. 26). Instead, the authors intended to describe the character of God (p. 27). Is Cox’s claim here in line with how you were taught to read Genesis? If not, how were you taught to understand this book?
3. How do you understand “original sin”? Does Cox’s take on the concept (pp. 28–32) deepen your understanding of it? Why or why not?
4. Rabbi Nahum M. Sarna writes, “The biblical heroes are not portrayed as demigods or perfect human beings.

They are mortals of flesh and blood, subject to the same temptations and possessed of the same frailties as are all other human beings” (p. 36). Have you ever been tempted to place certain biblical characters on a moral pedestal? How might their obvious shortcomings enable us to more fully relate to them and their stories?

FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF MOSES: THE BOOK OF EXODUS

1. Textual analysis, Cox claims, plays a role in reading and interpreting the book of Exodus, but “archaeology holds a much more prominent place, and thoughtful readers of the Bible need to know something about it” (p. 42). He then mentions the lack of archaeological evidence for an actual exodus (p. 52). Does this lack of evidence change how you view this important biblical story? What role does archaeology play in your approach to Exodus, and the Bible as a whole?
2. The famous “I am who I am” passage (Exodus 3:14) has long posed translation challenges for scholars. “Since the ongoing dispute enables us to see how the most renowned experts do not agree, it also frees us from being boxed into a single unambiguous definition of God. And maybe that is exactly what God intended” (p. 56).
3. According to Cox, the aim of the authors of Exodus was not to construct a historical record of events but to “craft an inspiring saga that would imbue the Israelite

people, who often felt threatened and fragmented, with a sense of unity and hope” (p. 61). How might contemporary Christians use the past to foster hope for the present? What stories could be used?

BATTLES AND BURLESQUES IN THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

1. We should read the Bible in different ways because the Bible is a collection of many different genres (p. 69). In the terms of this chapter, what genre describes the book of Joshua? How did you come to classify it that way?
2. For Cox, a right reading of the book of Joshua requires asking the intent of the authors, which he sees as wanting to “equate Joshua with Moses and the conquest of Canaan with the escape from Egypt” (p. 73). How does knowing this intent change how you read and understand this book? How might looking for intent change how you read and understand other books of the Bible?
3. “If it teaches us little else,” writes Cox, “the book of Joshua should remind us to be cautious about people who are sure they are doing exactly what God wants them to do; and this includes us” (p. 74). Where do you see people making such claims today? Have you ever made such a claim?

TALKING BACK TO GOD FROM THE GARBAGE HEAP: THE BOOK OF JOB

1. “Reading [the book of Job] can remind us that poetry, drama, dance, and music are better vehicles for conveying spiritual meaning than is most philosophy . . . or even most theology” (p. 92). Have you personally experienced how the arts can present spiritual meaning in a fresh way? Describe that experience.
2. Cox presents Gustavo Gutiérrez’s unique interpretation of the book of Job: “[Gutiérrez] holds that the theme of the book of Job is not the impenetrable human mystery of suffering, but rather how to speak of God from the rubbish pile” (p. 94). How might reading Job from this perspective enable us to hear and more fully understand the cries of those who suffer?
3. The language of complaint, Cox notes, while historically present in Judaism, is relatively absent in Christianity: “Calling God out about the agony of our fellow creatures has become pale and bloodless” (p. 98). Why is this the case? What role should the language of complaint play in the Christian life? Have you ever benefited from using this language in prayer or worship?

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THE VOICELESS: AMOS AND THE PROPHETS

1. Scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel suggested that the Hebrew prophets are reminding their audiences of

God's voice for the voiceless and the forgotten, as opposed to merely speaking for God (p. 104). Are you familiar with this interpretation of the prophets? How might it change the way you view these writings?

2. For Cox, "the prophets are most helpful to us today not because they tore down other people's altars, but because they constantly spelled out what it meant to serve Yahweh alone in the homeland" (p. 111). Do you turn to the prophetic books to help you "serve Yahweh alone" more faithfully in your own life? Why or why not?
3. "Speaking to us from a distant past," Cox writes, "[the prophets] are as relevant as this morning's headlines" (p. 123). How can the prophetic writings empower and equip you and your faith community to confront the injustice, inequality, and suffering that you read about or see on a daily basis?

GETTING TO THE FINAL FOUR: GOSPELS, KEPT AND DISCARDED

1. "Why are there just four [Gospels]? Why not five, or seven, or twelve? Why not only one?" (p. 125). Have you ever asked yourself these questions? Why or why not?
2. The Bible is the product of "a fractious history," "rough-and-tumble battles," and a "tortuous process" (p. 127). Before reading this chapter, were you aware of this his-

tory? Does knowing more about this history affect how you see the Bible? If so, how?

3. Cox recommends a “comparative reading” of the four Gospels (p. 130). How might you benefit from reading each author’s different take on who Jesus was and what Jesus means? What might be the challenges of doing this?

LOOKING OVER THE SHOULDERS OF THE WRITERS: MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE

1. “Inquiry into nonbiblical and ancient history can often connect the dots and fill in the colors of biblical narratives” (p. 144). When you read and study the Bible, do you ever consult such sources? Why or why not? How might doing so enrich your understanding of scripture?
2. “From the earliest years of their history, different clusters of Christians and differing perceptions of the meaning of Jesus already coexisted. Variety is not a newcomer to Christianity. It was there from the outset” (p. 154). How does your faith community handle different interpretations of the meaning of Jesus? How do you?
3. Cox suggests that Bonhoeffer’s famous question, “Who is Christ for us today?” can ultimately be answered only by a “personal response”—that is, something “much deeper” than the tools of biblical studies can provide (p. 162). How would you answer this question?

ON THE ROAD WITH PAUL OF TARSUS: THE EPISTLES

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Cox lists “a catalog of allegations” (p. 165) made by critics against the apostle Paul. Which of these are familiar to you? Do you personally relate to any of them? If so, which ones?
2. For scholar Richard Horsley, the “empire studies” approach to Paul’s letters suggests that “the Roman Empire is not just the *background* of Paul’s letters; it is the *foreground*” (p. 166). Have you ever viewed Paul’s letters from this perspective? After reading this chapter, how might the “empire studies” approach enrich your reading and interpretation of these important biblical books?
3. In the second half of this chapter, Cox addresses three challenging issues raised by Paul’s letters: the role of women in churches (pp. 176–78), the relationship between Christians and governing authorities (pp. 178–80), and homosexuality (pp. 180–82). Did you find Cox’s treatment of these issues helpful? Where did you agree? Where did you disagree? Why?

SURVIVING A TURBULENT TRIP: THE BOOK OF REVELATION

1. “John’s purpose in writing Revelation,” Cox suggests, “was to encourage his beleaguered brothers and sisters in faith during a period of persecution. It was meant to

reassure them that, although things now looked dim, ultimately God's love and justice would triumph" (p. 192). How might this description of Revelation change how you read this book from now on?

2. Read Cox's description of dispensationalism and pre-millennialism and their connection to Revelation (p. 206). Why do you think so many contemporary American Christians have connected these concepts with Revelation? Have you ever done so? If so, who taught you to make this connection?
3. Cox writes that serious readers of Revelation "should not avoid questions about how it is deployed by often contradictory interpreters today" (p. 205). How have you seen Revelation used in churches, popular culture, and more? Describe a healthy and helpful use of Revelation. Describe an unhealthy and unhelpful use of Revelation.

HOW DO WE READ THE BIBLE TODAY?

1. People read the Bible with "wildly disparate motivations" (p. 215). What different motivations for reading the Bible have you encountered? What are your own motivations for reading the Bible?
2. According to Cox, the Bible is a "book about the dramatic interaction between God and the world, mainly that part of the world we call humankind" (p. 216).

How might seeing the Bible from this “big-picture” perspective enrich your reading of it from this point on?

3. “The point is,” Cox writes, “that if we do not read the Bible with a genuine openness to being spoken to, perhaps upset and shaken by what we find in it, we will have missed the message” (p. 217). What would it look like to become “upset and shaken” by reading the Bible? Would you say that you approach the Bible with “a genuine openness to being spoken to”? Why or why not?
4. Cox encourages the importance of reading the Bible alongside “other” Bible readers. He mentions three groups who fall into that category: those who read the Bible “from below,” those who read the Bible “as adherents of other faiths,” and those who retell biblical narratives from artistic perspectives, such as “poets, novelists, visual artists, and filmmakers” (p. 218). Do you have experience reading the Bible alongside people from one or more of these three groups? Which group could most strengthen your own reading of the Bible?

CONCLUSION

1. The Bible “has molded the institutions, values, and worldview not just of Western civilization, but in recent history of the whole world as well” (p. 230). How have you seen the Bible’s influence in American culture? Beyond American culture?

2. “At the personal level,” Cox suggests, “since our civilization constitutes a large part of who I am, the Bible, even before I open it, has entered into my formation as a person” (p. 230). Where have you seen the Bible’s influence on your own life?
3. After reading this book, how do you see the Bible differently? How do you see the act of reading the Bible differently? What from this book will you incorporate into your own reading of the Bible in the future?