

**SMALL
GROUP
GUIDES**
from HarperOne

How the Bible *Actually* Works*



*In Which I Explain How
an Ancient, Ambiguous,
and Diverse Book Leads
Us to Wisdom Rather
Than Answers—and
Why That's Great News

Peter Enns

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1: THE BIBLE'S TRUE PURPOSE

1. According to Peter Enns, “The Bible is ancient, ambiguous, and diverse” (p. 5). How does this description strike you? If you had to come up with three of your own words to describe the Bible, which would you choose, and why?
2. What would you say is the “purpose” of the Bible?
3. “The Bible holds out for us an invitation to join an ancient, well-traveled, and sacred quest to know God, the world we live in, and our place in it . . . a lifelong journey soaked in divine wisdom” (pp. 10, 16). Does this describe how you view the Bible? Why or why not?

2: THE BIBLE DOESN'T REALLY TELL US WHAT TO DO— AND THAT'S A GOOD THING

1. Do you think of the Bible as a “divine instruction manual” (p. 24)? Describe how you view and use the Bible for guidance.
2. Enns cites Proverbs 26:4–5 (p. 29) to make the point that the Bible doesn't tell us what to do; it models the permission to figure it out. What do these verses have to teach us about how to understand the Bible's teaching?

3. How is “living a life of wisdom . . . a sacred responsibility” (p. 41)?

3: GOD’S LAWS: EVASIVE AND FIDGETY LITTLE BUGGERS

1. When you think of God’s laws (all 613 of them!), what images or phrases come to mind? What do you make of Enns’s engagement with these laws?
2. Enns writes, “Transposing the past is an act of wisdom” (p. 70). What does he mean by this? How does interacting with God’s laws take wisdom?

4: WISDOM = TIME + DIVERSITY

1. “Parents have to stay flexible and be ready to adjust on the fly, because situations change and children get older. I really can’t think of a better analogy for how the Bible works as a wisdom book” (p. 75). Whether you’re a parent or not, how might this analogy deepen your understanding of not only how to read the Bible, but also what the Bible is for in the first place?
2. How does Enns see the diversity of the Bible as one of its core virtues or characteristics?

5: WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGES

1. “Without the crisis of exile, the Bible as we know it wouldn’t exist” (p. 102). What did the exile force the Israelites to do? Why does that matter today?
2. How the Bible “behaves as a book of wisdom” displays for us “the normalcy of seeking the presence of God for ourselves in our here and now” (pp. 112–113). What examples does Enns cite of the Bible behaving as a book of wisdom?

6: WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

1. Enns sometimes feels dissonance when he simultaneously considers both the cosmic and personal aspects of God (p. 121). How do you hold these two things in tension? Do you tend to see God more in one way than the other? Why is that?
2. “The sacred responsibility . . . is really a call to follow this biblical lead by reimagining God in our time and place” (p. 125). What does reimagining God in this way look like?
3. “Whether we are aware of it or not, behind our religious deliberations, in one form or another, we are really asking a deeply foundational question, ‘What kind of God do I believe in, really?’” (p. 126). How would you

answer this question? How is this book impacting your answer?

7: IMAGINING AND REIMAGINING GOD

1. Enns cautions against two extremes when it comes to thinking about how the biblical authors describe God: “The first is looking down on this ancient view of God as simply ‘wrong.’ The other is elevating this view off the pages of history, of taking it as timeless and ‘correct’ because it’s in the Bible” (p. 144). What does Enns propose instead of these two extremes?
2. How does Enns make sense of passages in the Bible where God is involved with physical violence (pp. 145–147)? Specifically, in relation to the nature and character of God? How do you?

8: INTERLUDE: JESUS AND ALL THAT

1. “What is the story of Jesus and the Good News if not a reimagining of the ‘God of the Bible?’” (p. 155). How does this claim strike you? Have you ever thought of Jesus in this way? Why or why not?
2. Enns has argued at multiple points in the book that “reimagining” the God of the Bible is central to not only how the Bible is meant to be read, but also the

Christian life itself (p. 156). What does he mean by this? How does this “reimagining” work?

9: SERIOUSLY UPDATING THE ANCIENT FAITH

1. “To maintain any tradition, you *need* to hold on to some aspects of the past *while at the same time* thinking creatively about how the past and the present can meet” (p. 165). When it comes to religious tradition, where have you seen this done well? Where have you seen this done poorly?
2. Enns points to Judaism as an example of a religious tradition that has survived because “it has adapted its sacred tradition to its ever-changing environment while at the same time maintaining the tradition” (p. 166). What might Christianity have to learn from this example as it ponders its survival in this current moment and beyond?

10: TREASURES OLD AND NEW

1. Enns claims that, in the Christian world, Jesus is often *not* thought of as “a wise teacher, a sage, a purveyor of wisdom and the deep mysteries of God, a teller of stories, a confounder of the so-called wise” (p. 197). Why is that? How does Enns see Jesus not only associated with the wisdom tradition of Judaism, but also modeling a fresh engagement with that tradition?

2. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John give us “four versions of the life of Jesus, and, as anyone can tell by reading them side by side, they don’t exactly match up” (p. 206). Why does Enns think we have these different versions? Why do you think we have them?

11: REIMAGINING GOD THE JESUS WAY

1. How did Jesus force the writers of the New Testament to reimagine God in their own moment? What was the result?
2. “What eventually became ‘Christianity’ began as a Jewish sect—a sect that stretched the boundaries of Judaism to its limit. Eventually, like Jesus’s wineskins, it stretched those boundaries too far” (p. 230). Where is Christianity “stretching” today? Where might Christianity need new “wineskins”?

12: DYING AND RISING FOR OTHERS

1. Enns asks, “*Why* did God raise Jesus from the dead? What’s the point? Was God just showing off? . . . Why do *this*?” (p. 241). How does he answer this question? What do you make of his answer?
2. What is one new thing that you learned about the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus from reading this

chapter? How is that impacting your understanding of Jesus? God? The Bible?

13: FIGURING IT OUT

1. “Reading the New Testament is like reading someone else’s mail” (p. 254). How might thinking of the New Testament in this way change how we read it?
2. Enns suggests that the writings of Paul are often misunderstood and taken out of context by Christians today. What advice does Enns offer for reading and interpreting these important writings?

14: GRACE AND PEACE TO YOU

1. What are ways to ensure that wisdom leads to dialogue with the past instead of a desire to return to that past?
2. “All our language of God, including that of the biblical writers, is inescapably enmeshed with how people of any time think and talk about anything—even as they speak of One who is not bound by time and place” (p. 276). Have you ever thought about how our language of God today is a product of our social, historical, and cultural location? How might that impact how we use that language?

FINAL QUESTIONS

1. How did reading this book deepen your understanding of not only how to read the Bible, but also what the Bible is *for* in the first place?
2. What “reimagining” of God is needed within Christianity today? Why? What reimagining have you done while reading this book?
3. Enns calls for Christians to seek the presence of God for themselves in the “here and now” (p. 113). How could you do that more intentionally?