

Permission Granted

Take the Bible into Your Own Hands

Jennifer Grace Bird

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Introduction

One of the main reasons people of faith read the Bible is to find out who God is and how we as humans can expect to relate to this God. The Bible, from this perspective, is a source of encouragement and faith formation. It is, for many people, a reminder that God is love and is in control, and that God wants good things for us, ultimately. Many people also see the Bible as a resource to turn to for knowing how to live one's life so that one's relationship with God will be a rich and meaningful one.

That is why I used to put a great deal of time into memorizing passages: I would then have God's words of insight and guidance with me at all times, and I could think and speak using God's words. This is why so many people have daily Bible readings in the morning or devote a portion of their daily schedule to personal Bible study. It is similar to investing in a relationship: if someone wants to know and love God or Jesus well, then they will put time into that relationship in a disciplined way. Even if this is not your reality, I hope you can see why so many people see it this way.

All these motivations were at work in my life. My relationship with Jesus was the most important thing in my life, to the point where I went on dates with Jesus, from time to time, in college. Yes, you read that correctly—I dated Jesus in college. I was not the only person I knew doing this, for it was seen as a form of piety, by many of my friends, at the time. “We” did things like go out for breakfast or to my favorite donut shop. It was time dedicated to, well, contemplating Jesus and life’s mysteries. Reading and understanding what the Bible said was of ultimate importance for me.

For years I had many people telling me what the Bible said or meant, which was often quite enriching for me. There were times when people would turn to the Hebrew or the Greek in order to prove a point, which always seemed to hold more sway for me than simply relying on the English translation. It did not matter if I did not like what they said; it was, to me, a more honest handling of the Bible, thus it was

a message I was more inclined to listen to. The closer to the original source, the more pure the message seemed to me to be. Perhaps you can see why the original languages had primacy for me and why my interest in them took me to seminary.

Two of the most influential women in my life, in my college and post-college years, were either already ordained or were seeking ordination. My mother was the one already ordained. On the day of her ordination—a day second in importance only to giving birth to her children—I had been so bold as to let her know what I knew scripture said about women’s ordination: I said that I did not understand how she could do such a thing, since it is against God’s Word. What’s fascinating about this is that I had grown up in a church that regularly had female pastors, all of whom I had loved and appreciated at the time. The fact that I could swing so far in my view of the ordination of women is a testament to how deeply the content of the Bible came to hold truth for me, over and against what others said or did.

To her credit, my mom did not push me out of the van as we were flying down the highway. Instead, she told me her story, the story of her journey that had brought her to the place of seeking ordination. Though I had seen this story play out, I had never known her side of its development. I was struck by what a conundrum this all was for me. The way she told it, it was never a matter of her wanting the role of pastor. Rather, the hand of God had guided her experience through members of our church appreciating and needing her to use her gifts.

In short, her experience had trumped the way I was reading the Bible, my final rule or authority. For me, experience was to be interpreted or directed in light of what the Bible said; it was never to be the other way around. This was one of the few times in my life that I have been speechless. I could not argue with what she had experienced even though her experience clashed with my convictions. Oy vey!

The next few years after her ordination, I continued to live my life with great enthusiasm for the commands and guidelines I saw within the scriptures. At times this meant wearing (newly purchased) baggy clothing for the sake of not causing my boyfriend to stumble. At other times, it meant finding ways to make sense of and be okay with difficult passages. Just because I did not like something in scripture did not mean I could disregard it. It was all God’s Word. Thus, there remained some form of tension or confusion for me, most intensely regarding the ordination of women.

There came a day when someone handed me a forty-page paper on women in leadership in the church. At the time I was told that, given my gifts in leadership and ministry, I could go as high as I wanted to in the para-church organization I was working in, even be president. But I just couldn't be the main pastor in a church. The paper justified this position, and it was what I also believed at the time. Primarily, women were not permitted to be in ultimate authority over a church or men in general (1 Tim. 2:11), but they could use their gifts, if done appropriately (1 Cor. 12, Rom. 12). The thesis was backed by other biblical passages, most importantly parts of Genesis 2–3, the place where all things began, if you will.

Shortly thereafter, I received a copy of a master's thesis in the mail, written by another important woman in my life. She focused on the "Martha and Mary" passage (Luke 10:38–42). The day I received her thesis, I immediately sat on the stairs leading up to my bedroom and read it, cover to cover. In it, this friend did something that shook me to my core. Working with the Greek text, she took the story to be saying that Jesus was affirming Mary, not just for sitting at his feet, but for choosing for herself. In this thesis, my friend had referenced me, by name, as an example of a Martha, giving in to what others expected of me. She had watched me not make my own choices, to my own detriment.

It was not just that my friend was saying that she believed in me that moved me. It was that someone, motivated by a passionate faith and a desire to be a follower of Christ, had seen something in the Bible that said that women could be true to themselves, and it was Jesus himself saying it! If someone could see this kind of a shift in the meaning of that passage, by looking at the nuances in the Greek, what other passages were up for such reconsideration?

That, my friends, is what ultimately had me moving cross-country to begin the three year Master of Divinity degree at Princeton Theological Seminary. I went to learn languages, and I learned them well. I went because my love of Jesus and for studying God's word were the most important things in my life. And if I was going to be taking my cues in life from this book, and such subtle nuances could exist in it, then I wanted to be able to study those terms and their nuances for myself.

People often say that the first year of seminary shakes a person's foundation, the second stirs up what is left, and the third is a year of rebuilding. I lived this pattern to a T. I was challenged to see the Bible

and my theological convictions in new ways that first year, to the point where, at times, it felt like a crisis of faith.

There are two things that allowed me to keep my head above water. The first was the assurance that God had given me my mind, thus it had to be okay to apply it to my faith (some people refer to this as “faith seeking understanding”). The second was the realization that if I could not at least consider new ideas about God and the Bible, if they could not handle being prodded and questioned, then they were not really worth my devotion. I concluded that both God and the Bible could handle my intellectual pursuits. In fact, it seemed to me then and still does to this day that it is the ultimate statement of respect for God to take ideas about God and the Bible so seriously.

So, while I am not trying to offer to a reader everything that I gained in seminary, or the subsequent years of PhD work, it is my intention to touch on the most salient points about the Bible that I have benefitted from learning and thinking about. These are also what I have found to be some of the juiciest topics for people, based on the dozens of Introduction to the Bible classes that I have taught. My two main goals are to invite you to engage your curiosity while reading passages from the Bible and to consider the issues I raise as they relate to the Bible. Let all these things inform your thinking as you take the Bible into your own hands.

For people of faith, these conversations sometimes initially involve a mixture of shock and uncertainty. The shock is usually due to never having heard the full story before, and wondering why they hadn’t! The uncertainty is usually due to being uncomfortable with the implications of this new information. For those of you feeling uncertain and uncomfortable, I would remind you of the two assurances that kept me afloat:

1. God gave you your brain, so it has to be okay to use it.
2. If they are worth your devotion, God and the Bible can handle your intellectual pursuits.

For those who are not so deeply connected to the Bible, who have perhaps pieced together an impression of scripture from popular culture and the loudest voices on the metaphorical street corner, the invitation still applies. Instead of leaning on what you have always heard about the Bible, you are now invited to read and consider it for yourself. The conversations we had in my introductory courses were so important and refreshing that it seemed to me that they ought to be happening

in places beyond college classrooms and campuses. This is my attempt to invite you—no matter what your age, religious background, or academic experience—into similar conversations and thoughtful engagement with the Bible.

The title of this book, *Permission Granted*, comes from watching the faces of faithful, smart students go from looking concerned to relieved as I told them that it is okay to think about these things for themselves. It was as if they had been waiting for years for the “go ahead” to apply their minds to what they saw on the pages of the Bible! But I understood why they were hesitant and that it came, primarily, from their respect for the Bible and the people who had taught them about it for years.

You will find that I begin every new topic by asking you to take stock of your own thoughts and beliefs related to the topic at hand. To this end, I also often pose a few questions to help draw out your thoughts on the topic. It helps to be clear about where you are starting, in any conversation. You might even find it helpful to discuss these things with a friend or partner.

I will also ask you to pause and think about things, from time to time. So much of what is contained in this book is simply me pointing out what is there, or what is conspicuously not in there, so reading the scriptures for yourself is essential. (If you don’t have a Bible handy, www.biblegateway.com is good.) In short, I urge you to read this book actively, not passively. Passive reading is what happens when you find yourself at the bottom of a page and realize you have no idea what it said. Active reading requires that you envision the stories as you read, engage your curiosity about the stories, and think through the implications of it all. Active reading requires a certain amount of critical (reflective) thought. You do not have to agree with what I say, but I encourage you to at least give the ideas a chance. Otherwise, this book will not be nearly as interesting or productive as it could be for you.

This leads me to a quotation, attributed to Aristotle, which summarizes a great deal of what this book is about: “It is the mark of an educated mind to entertain a thought without accepting it.” Notice the depth of familiarity implied in “entertaining a thought,” such as when we entertain guests at our homes. We invite them in, make them feel welcome and comfortable. Above all, we are seeking to know and understand our guests, whether or not we come to agree with every position they hold or become close friends. This is what it looks like to entertain a thought. You do not have to agree with something in order

to understand it. But I don't think it is fair to dismiss something you have not yet tried diligently to understand.

Part of the point of this book is to make some scholarly material more readily accessible to a general public than it tends to be, and thus I will do my best to explain, in context, what may be new concepts for some readers. Also, as you read through this book, you will see that there is a good deal of "see also chapter ____" parenthetical comments. This is not meant to be purely self-referential; rather it is highlighting the complexity of scripture and that any one topic can be approached from multiple angles.

If you are the type of person to read only the chapters that most interest you, I understand but nonetheless encourage you, even plead with you, to read chapter 1 first. There are some significant ideas and points in that chapter that carry over into all the others.

Finally, let me reassure you that I am not trying to "poke holes" in anyone's faith. I am trying to help you see the nature of some of the passages in the Bible in a way that respects it, even if it is a startlingly new perspective. Seeing any part of the Bible differently than you did before does not change who God is, it simply changes the way you see how the Bible helps you relate to God. For those who have knee-jerk reactions to challenging what they have always thought or been told about the Bible, let me be the one to assure you that it is understandable to respond that way and then to encourage you to go ahead, take the Bible into your own hands, and consider all these things for yourself.

Permission granted.

1

What the Bible Is and Is Not

As we begin the discussion about what the Bible is and is not, take a few moments to take stock of your own view of the Bible. Is it a source of inspiration? Is it the mouthpiece of God, through which you and your faith community hear what God has to say to you? Is it something you read for daily devotion?

Similarly, take a moment to think about the nature of the Bible. Reflect on the words that you choose to use to describe it and what they mean. For instance, if you say every word is inspired by God, do you mean that the Bible is inerrant and infallible? Or was it inspired in a more general sense, in that the wisdom it contains was written by people greatly inspired?

Have you ever seen the bumper sticker that says, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.”? Of course, while I am sure not everyone reading this book will think of the Bible in this way, I do think it is helpful to understand where someone who does is coming from. Grasping why some people believe with all their being that the Bible is inerrant and infallible can be quite enlightening.

Let’s begin with that word *inerrant*. *Inerrant* simply means “free from error.” Using this word to describe the Bible is usually a way to say something about its trustworthiness. A person who uses this word typically believes that God inspired absolutely everything within the Bible. Thus, every word on every page, every promise and command is intended and relevant for the believer reading it today. The level of

What's in a Name?

The names that I am using to refer to the two testaments in the Christian Bible might be new to you. I would like to explain what they mean and why I make this choice.

If you approach the Bible from a Christian perspective, you will most likely think of it as having two testaments: the Old and the New. (You might also think of it as including the Apocrypha, but that is another matter.) The thing is, the books in the "Old Testament" make up the entire Bible for Jews. Thus it is a bit disrespectful to refer to the primary set of Jewish sacred writings with a label that implies that something newer and better has come along. So, out of respect for the fact that Christians and Jews both read that first testament, I prefer not to call it the "Old Testament."

But finding a way to refer to that testament respectfully gets a bit tricky. The Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament use all the same books, but in different orders. The Jewish Bible groups and orders them by genre: the Torah (first five books), the Prophets, and the Writings. Using the first letter of the Hebrew words for each section, we get the acronym T.N.K., pronounced Tanak. But since the Tanak and the Old Testament have a slightly different ordering of the books, they tell different overall stories. From this perspective, then, they are not exactly the same thing.

Some people make the suggestion that the two testaments be referred to as the First and the Second Testaments. I like that this suggestion honors the historical development, without implying that the Christian tradition has replaced Judaism.

Finally, some suggest that we call it the "Hebrew Bible" as a way to refer to the language it was written in, originally (although a small portion was written in Aramaic).

I hope that you can begin to see how complicated this matter is! For ease or convenience, I prefer to call it the "Hebrew Bible."

When it comes to the New Testament we still have a bit of a labeling issue. If I had gone with "First Testament" for the Hebrew Bible, we could call this the Second Testament. But I did not in this case. Similarly, some people suggest calling it the Newer Testament, or the Christian Testament. Now, this last one is not entirely accurate, since both testaments in the Christian Bible are "Christian," strictly speaking. All these concerns noted, I will refer to the New Testament as the "Newer Testament."

If you are wondering why some people make such a big deal out of labels or names, consider how powerful our words and language

are. Think about the time people put into choosing names for their children. Even nicknames that we give to one another matter and have meaning. The adage “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is not entirely true. Ask anyone who has been verbally bullied. Words can wound. Words can also give life. Our language and the ways we choose to talk about something do have power and do matter to us.

This is why I am careful about how I refer to the contents of Bible, which has been cherished by millions of people around the world, over many centuries. I hope you will join me in being similarly thoughtful about the way you choose to talk about it.

One final caveat on names and labels: The first time I heard someone call the scriptures “writings” or even, brace yourself, “texts,” I was so shocked I didn’t hear another word of that lecture. How dare he be so casual with the Bible! However, there is nothing wrong with calling the books of the Bible “texts” or “writings,” since that is precisely what they are. When I use these labels, I do not mean to offend, and I assure you that I take these scriptures quite seriously.

trust in this way of thinking is difficult to describe adequately; you trust God, so you trust that God carefully directed how the Bible was made, at every step along the way.

This perspective usually goes hand-in-hand with the idea that the Bible is as perfect as God is perfect. If you pause to consider the implications of this belief, the stakes are quite high for a person defending the Bible’s inerrancy. Saying the Bible isn’t perfect may feel tantamount to challenging who God is, and if you are going to question that, where does the questioning stop? It feels like an all-or-nothing gig.

This is how I saw things at one point, so I can empathize with this conviction. The first time someone I respected challenged the Bible’s inerrancy, this thing called a “slippery slope” suddenly became very real to me. As you can imagine, that level of questioning does not appeal to a person who believes that “all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (1 Tim. 3:16). This verse is, after all, a significant part of why so many Christians take this inerrancy approach to the Bible. Scripture being “God-breathed” is also taken to mean that it is “God-inspired.” The reference to “all scripture” is taken to mean everything contained in the

Christian Bible. The reasons are mounting for why some people get defensive when someone suggests that there are errors or contradictions within the Bible.

So, in light of these things, I invite you to take a few moments to mull over the following two points:

1. WHAT SCRIPTURE DOES 1 TIMOTHY 3:16 REFER TO?

The letter of 1 Timothy was written before the Gospels and letters that make up the Newer Testament were considered to be “scripture.” The author of 1 Timothy would have been writing from the tradition of Judaism. So “scripture” referred only to the passages in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings that he would have been familiar with.

Additionally, the author of 1 Timothy could not have anticipated the formation of the Newer Testament (which was formalized in the late fourth century), much less that his letter would be included in it. Some people (including myself, at one time) might claim that God knew what writings would eventually be considered scripture, wanted this line to refer to all scripture, and therefore inspired 1 Timothy’s author to say those things. Viewing the Bible as inerrant makes such reasoning possible, but it doesn’t take seriously the writer’s actual context or intention.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this question that I hope you will think about is this: if you have a passage in scripture that says that all scripture is God-breathed, then you have a self-validating system or an example of “circular reasoning.” Think about this for a moment. While convenient, I do not think that God would endorse such sneakiness.

2. WHAT DID “GOD-BREATHED” MEAN?

Now that we know that *scripture* meant the Hebrew Bible, we are still left with a conundrum: how are we to understand the “God-breathed” part? Would the original recipients have thought it meant that every word in the Hebrew Bible was as God intended, as many people take it to mean today? Or would they have thought of it in the generally inspired kind of way? Would the original audience have thought that it meant that there would be no errors, in terms of names and places and dates, and that every story happened just as it is narrated, as many

people do today? Of course, we will never know. But here are a few insights for you to consider, for now. We will get into more depth on these topics throughout the book.

Let's take the idea that all the stories in the Bible happened exactly as they are told to us. This is, for instance, what people believe to be the case when they hold to a strict Creationist perspective on the origins of the planet. They read the first couple of chapters of Genesis as a narration of what transpired "in the beginning." Aside from this being a bit difficult, since no one was there to transcribe what God said and did, there are logical problems to the poetic order described in Genesis 1, such as the occurrence of day and night before there was a sun to rise and set.

As for the matter of there being no inaccuracies, in terms of names or dates or places, you could compare Judges 1 with Joshua 10. Joshua's narrative makes it clear that the Israelites kill everyone they come across, slaughtering town after town full of people. Judges tells us that the Israelites did not drive out the inhabitants of the land but that the Canaanites remained and the Israelites settled among them. Surely these cannot both have transpired. But there is a way to read both accounts that respects them and does not require that you ditch your faith as a result. It does require that you read with an understanding of the stories' contexts and why they were written and at least a dose of how histories were told and passed down at the time.

On the matter of every word being exactly as God intended it to be, consider juxtaposing the following passages. Exodus 34:6: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Compare this with Genesis 6:6, where God is said to regret having made humankind, or Exodus 32:9-10, where God calls the Israelites "stiff-necked" people and wants to let the divine wrath consume them. Can those all be accurate representations of God? Maybe we can read some of these passages in a way that honors them, without having to attribute them all to God's intention. But if they are all read literally, then there seems to be a contradiction in there, somewhere.

What about what we see in scripture regarding murder? The sixth commandment, of the "Top 10," says not to murder, clear and simple. Yet, the LORD also tells the Israelites to slaughter towns full of people and to put people to death as a consequence for many offenses described in the other commandments. So, which is it?

While the idea that the Bible is God-inspired can be quite a comforting thought, taking this idea literally can set people up to expect the Bible to be a kind of book that it is not, leading to some very

uncomfortable mental gymnastics in the attempt to reconcile conflicting statements and one's own experience.

The Bible is actually a collection of writings. The books of the Bible were all written by humans. They did not descend from the heavens as one perfect whole, bound together, Genesis to Revelation. Many of the books of the Hebrew Bible were written down hundreds of years after the events they narrate. Think about how the stories would have been adapted over time, for different audiences and situations. We see something similar with some of the Newer Testament writings, primarily with the Gospels and Acts. The earliest Gospel was written down at least thirty years after Jesus' execution and resurrection, and the latest was another thirty years later. The book of Acts depicts what Jesus' disciples did in the early 30s but was not committed to writing until the mid-80s.

Perhaps it is okay, then, to begin to rethink how you see the writings in the Bible. The idea of scripture being perfect, as many people would have us believe, needs to be set aside. Did those authors believe that they were capturing events exactly as they had happened? Is that even possible or a reasonable thing to suggest?

Some people would counter that God told them exactly what to write and that is how the authors were able to write without errors. I see the appeal of this belief, since I used to hold it myself. But somewhere in the process of the writing of these texts, this belief becomes difficult to uphold. Was it the original version (none of which we still have) that was inspired? For many of the scriptures, what we have today are copies of copies that include small, and sometimes significant, add-ons. Furthermore, though we turn to the same basic collection of hundreds of manuscripts (in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) to produce a copy of the Bible today, we know that a saying in any language will lose something in translation to our modern languages. So which version is exactly what God wanted?

The books of the Bible were written for various reasons, employing several genres. Most, if not all, of the Bible was written by men and from their perspectives. So, let's take a look at why motivations, genres, and perspective matter.

MOTIVATION BEHIND THE WRITINGS

I have heard many people say that the Bible is best understood as: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth—B.I.B.L.E. This approach to the

Bible says that we can read the words on the pages as they present themselves, trusting that God's truths are eternal and that God's Spirit will reveal to you the truths you need to hear. But if you have not stopped to ask what it was that people thought they were communicating to others when they told the first story of creation in Genesis 1 (see chap. 2), or why someone was writing down David's story at all (chap. 6), or even what we should expect from a biography of Jesus (chap. 9), then there is a good chance we will look for and expect to find the wrong things in the words of the Bible.

Whatever the original motivations at work were, we do know that they were written to inspire faith in God and to give the original faith community a sense of collective identity. No question. But that does not mean that we should expect all the stories to have taken place just as they are told. In fact, in some cases, it does not even matter if the stories took place at all. What matters is that the stories are there and have defined reality and identities for millions of people over the centuries. They have even inspired countless masterpieces, without which our world would be much the poorer.

But there are also stories and passages in the Bible that seem to have been written to justify some pretty horrific things. Thus, as reasonable, rational, and loving people, we might want to be able to say that some parts of the Bible are not inspired by God but by humans (chaps. 5 and 7).

It is also worth noting that the purpose and the genre—why someone writes and the form he wrote in—are often intimately connected. This leads us to the discussion of genres found in the Bible.

GENRES IN THE BIBLE

Being aware of the different genres used in the Bible allows you to read a passage appropriately. There are many people who believe that the truth contained in the Bible is entirely self-evident, such that one can find a line anywhere within the Bible and immediately apply it to one's life. Similarly, one can connect two lines or passages, if they have a word or idea in common, and they can serve to support each other, regardless of the context of each passage. This practice is often called "cherry-picking," because people pick and choose which verses to read and leave others out. In pairing passages based on shared ideas, however, we often overlook the all-important context and form of the writing.

The list of genres used in the Bible might surprise you. Histories are the most common type of story. A good deal of the Hebrew Bible is comprised of this genre, but it is also found in Acts in the Newer Testament. There are also songs and hymns, especially the one hundred fifty contained in Psalms, though they are also strewn throughout the Bible in various places. There is poetry, even love poetry between two lovers not yet living in the same home, in the Song of Solomon. The Gospels are most akin to ancient biographies, which are different from modern biographies. There are personal letters and letters written to communities. There is political propaganda. (Yikes! That's a scary one!) There is even politically subversive writing in the Bible. The writing contained in the books of the Prophets is its own kind of a genre, appropriately labeled "prophetic literature." There are a couple instances of apocalyptic literature, as well: parts of Daniel and the entire book of Revelation.

Perhaps most unsettling for those hearing it the first time is that there are also myths in the Bible. When I say *myth*, I mean this in the proper sense of the word, not in the "that's nothing but a lie" connotation (see chap. 2). *Myths* are stories that were written to explain something unexplainable at the time, such as a natural phenomenon (a rainbow); to give a backstory that explains certain cultural practices (Israelites' weekly day of rest); or to give a "reason" for things such as women's severe pain in childbirth.

The fact that stories were written for particular reasons does not change what is in them. But it might change the way you think about the stories. Most often when people begin to read with context and writing type in mind, they find the writings more meaningful, not less.

VOICE OF THE AUTHORS

When I talk about the voice of the authors, I am referring to two things about the biblical content: from whose perspective the stories are told and whose concerns are represented.

First, not only were the books of the Bible written by humans, and not dictated directly by God, but they were also almost exclusively written by men. In other words, we get very little in the Bible from the perspective of women. Even the stories written about women, or that have women protagonists, are likely written by men. Please pause to consider the implications of this fact. Sometimes people get uncomfortable

or slightly defensive when they first consider this issue. Many of my students have responded to hearing this by wondering if I hate men. My opinion of the males among us is not the issue, though. This aspect of the Bible, the sex of its authors, has far-reaching implications. Let's look at why that is the case.

I do not wish to start some sort of battle of the sexes here, nor do I wish to overgeneralize about men or women. But for a moment, think about the people in your life, both male and female (and any who fall somewhere in between). Do you have a sense of how a group of men sitting around a campfire might tell stories as compared to how a group of women might do the same? Then consider that we have hundreds of stories, all told from the perspective of men. In lacking women's voices and perspectives, we are also missing what matters to them in these stories. If we take into consideration how patriarchal the culture was that produced the Bible—by *patriarchal* I mean a culture in which males are the head of each family and dominant in every regard—then we can be safe in assuming that patriarchal values will play out in the stories as we find them.

Many people would suggest that we not judge these ancient cultures based on our modern values. I agree. This is not meant to be a judgment on people from a different time and place. This is merely an observation that I think is crucial for you to consider in terms of what you will find in the scriptures. After all, though some of our cultural values have changed, we continue to turn to scriptures with ancient patriarchal value systems. Take a moment to think about this tension.

Additionally, what this means is that it can be rather enlightening to stop and try to think through any given story from the perspective of a woman who is in it, regardless of whether or not she is named or has any lines. It can be a rather fun exercise, if you are up for it.

For instance, why not think through the story of Noah from the perspective of his wife? (Your version of her might be slightly different than Jennifer Connelly's character in the 2014 blockbuster.) Can you imagine what questions she might ask Noah? What about when Abraham and Sarah pretend that they are siblings so that the Egyptians would not kill Abraham and take Sarah for themselves (Gen. 12)? Ever wonder what that first night was like for her, as the newest addition to Pharaoh's harem? Or perhaps sort through a bigger story, such as Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac from Sarah's perspective. She was not consulted by Abraham in this matter; he simply took their son and

went for a three-day hike. Hmmmm. That would not go over very well with any of the mothers that I know today.

We could look at a story in John 8, which is typically called, “The Woman Caught in Adultery.” Even this label raises questions, since the last time I checked it took two to tango. (Where is the man?) If you read that story from her perspective, instead of focusing on what Jesus does, you might be surprised by the questions that come to mind. Many of my students have suggested it be called “The Woman Framed for Adultery” or “Jesus Calls Out Hypocrisy.” They might not be as catchy, but they highlight a very different aspect of that story than when you label it focusing on the woman’s sexual behavior. My point here is that not only are the stories quite rich with possibilities, in terms of how to read them, but even the way our Bibles label stories has an influence on how we read and on what we expect of the people in the stories.

What about Separation of Church and State?

Whenever I talk about how the Bible has an influence on people’s political and social choices, someone always protests that there should be a separation of church and state. Keep in mind that “Separation of Church and State” was intended to protect our religious and worship choices and practices. It was not about protecting the State from your faith. Your beliefs and religious convictions go with you everywhere and inform everything you do. It does not make sense for them to be separated from what you do in the realms of politics and society.

I know many people who think of themselves as faithful Christians who will state that they are not concerned about politics. Their focus is on the spiritual aspect of their faith, which makes sense given all the time and energy put into talking about a person’s personal “walk” or “spiritual growth.” While these are all great things, the focus on the individual tends to take our attention off of the social realm that we all share.

To deny that our beliefs and convictions do affect how we behave politically is to deny that we live in communities together. Since we clearly live in communities together, we are political people (the Greek term for “city” is *polis*). If you draw your worldview primarily from scripture, you are perpetuating some of those ancient values, not just within your homes but in society as well, often without even realizing it. This is, indeed, something to think about.

Perhaps you are starting to see what I mean by raising the issue of who is telling the stories. You might want to be conscious of who seems to be narrating these stories. If the narrator tends to take a man's perspective, what are we missing? It also means that the stories will reflect the cultural expectations of men and women at that time.

Second, in terms of why voice matters, pay attention to what the stories indicate are the matters of concern. For instance, what kinds of assumptions about who God is does the author build on? What message does a story send about how we can treat one another? Since these stories are in the Bible, many people assume that their messages are de facto acceptable. But just because we see something in the Bible does not mean that it is something we should be perpetuating today. (If you need some specific examples to back up this last claim, chaps. 4, 5, and 7 are good ones to turn to next.)

CONCLUSION

The human authorship of the books is important to keep in mind, as is an awareness of genre, as you read the Bible. On some level, this can actually be reassuring. It means that mistakes or duplicate stories with very different messages do not need to cause a crisis of faith. It also means that there might be messages that you think no longer apply, and you can embrace this realization instead of ignore it.

I cannot recall how many people have asked me why I ask so many questions about the Bible instead of "just believing what it says." I understand that they were simply getting tired of my challenging what they had always believed. But it also concerns me when an adult believes that she cannot ask questions, whether it is of her partner or spouse, her pastor, or the book she turns to for guidance in life—the Bible. If we cannot ask questions of these sources of guidance and direction, or of our life companions, why are we trusting them to such a deeply personal degree? Similarly, if you believe that God created you with the mind that you have, why would God say that you can apply your mind to everything in this world except for how you read the Bible? So allow me to be the one to say it: You are free to apply your brilliant mind to matters even as important as your faith and your understanding of the Bible!

Permission granted.



TAKE THE BIBLE INTO YOUR OWN HANDS

1. What terms do you prefer to use for the two testaments of the Bible? Why do you use them?
2. Do you consider the Bible “God-breathed”? If so, why? What exactly does that term mean to you?
3. How does thinking about the motivations of each biblical writer enhance your understanding and appreciation of the story?
4. Pick a favorite story from the Bible and reimagine it from the perspective of a woman in the story (or even an anonymous female bystander to the story). How might that woman have told the story differently? How might modern readers think of the story had it been written by that woman?
5. How should we read scriptures reflecting the values of ancient cultures (for example, patriarchy, slavery, or polygamy) in light of the values we hold today? What are some potential effects of considering those texts infallible?