

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time

Marcus J. Borg

Discussion Guide

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time, by Marcus J. Borg (Harper San Francisco, copyright © 2001), provides new understanding and appreciation for the Bible by offering thoughtful insights for reading the Bible anew. While respecting both tradition and reality, biblical expert Marcus Borg shows how to take the Bible seriously, but not literally. This book shares a “historical-metaphorical” way of reading the Bible and is a thinking person’s guide to the Scriptures.

Permission is granted to reproduce this discussion guide.

Chapter 1

Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again

This chapter explores why new lenses are needed for reading and seeing the Bible.

1. Share why you have selected this book to read and what you hope to learn from it.
2. What is the relationship between how one reads the Bible and how one sees or views things?
3. Describe the main two conflicting ways that the Bible has been read. Discuss why there is a need for a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible.
4. How has accessibility of the Bible to a wide audience been a mixed blessing?
5. Discuss the beliefs of the two main groups in the conflict about how to see and read the Bible.
6. What beliefs about the Bible were you taught as a child in Sunday School? How have your beliefs changed over the years?
7. Explain the difference between “natural literalism” and “conscious literalism” and give an example of how they differ.

8. List and discuss the elements of the older way of seeing Christianity. Why has this older way ceased to be effective?

Chapter 2

Reading Lenses: The Bible and God

This chapter looks at the different ways that the relationship between God and the Bible can be described: the Bible as a human response to God, the Bible as sacred Scripture, the Bible as sacrament of the sacred, and the Bible as God's Word.

1. What does it mean to view the Bible as a human response to God?
2. Discuss the justification for seeing the Bible as a human product. Share your views.
3. According to the author, what challenges arise when the Bible is seen as both divine and human?
4. What is the difference between referring to the Bible as "sacred in status" rather than "sacred in origin"?
5. What does it mean that the Bible is a "sacrament of the sacred"?
6. Discuss what it means to call the Bible "the Word of God." Why is it significant to say the "Word" (singular and capitalized) rather than the "words" (plural and lower-case) of God?
7. List and discuss the three metaphors for seeing the Bible.
8. What new insight about the Bible did you receive from reading this chapter?

Chapter 3

Reading Lenses: History and Metaphor

This chapter introduces a "historical-metaphorical approach" for reading the Bible.

1. In your own words, explain what is meant by a "historical approach" and a "metaphorical approach" to reading the Bible.
2. Discuss the importance of the historical approach and its limitations.
3. What controls are needed for the metaphorical approach and how are these controls provided?
4. Why do the historical and metaphorical approaches to reading the Bible need each other?

5. List and discuss some examples of purely historical and purely metaphorical narratives. Do you believe the story about Jesus changing water into wine is metaphorical or historical? Explain your reasoning.
 6. What is the overall purpose and subject of the narratives in the Bible? What do they describe?
 7. What new insights did you receive from reading this chapter?
-

Chapter 4

Reading the Creation Stories Again

This chapter takes a new look at biblical stories of how the world began.

1. What did you believe about the creation stories as a child? How have your beliefs changed over the years? After reading this chapter?
 2. Compare and contrast the “P” and the “J” creation stories. How do the differing concerns and contexts of these two groups affect the telling of this story?
 3. Why did Israel originate the creation stories? How does the 6-day creation story reinforce the importance of the Sabbath?
 4. Discuss the term “myth” as used in the study of religion.
 5. Share your reactions and beliefs concerning God as creator and the God-world relationship.
 6. What do ancient Israel’s stories of creation affirm about the human race?
 7. Discuss the different ways of interpreting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. (This has been referred to as the doctrine of the “the fall” or “original sin.”)
-

Chapter 5

Reading the Pentateuch Again

This chapter explores the biblical stories of the creation of Israel.

1. What is the Pentateuch? What does the word mean and to what books of the Bible does it refer?
2. Explain why the Pentateuch was the foundation of ancient Israel’s life.

3. Give some examples of how the theme of promise and fulfillment flows through the Pentateuch.
 4. How does the theme of promise and fulfillment closely connect to the theme of creation in Genesis?
 5. How is the account of the exodus a story of God's will and character?
 6. What does the Pentateuch reveal to us today about God and his faithfulness?
 7. What do you believe are the main themes and messages of the Pentateuch?
-

Chapter 6

Reading the Prophets Again

This chapter shows how the prophets are heard most clearly when heard historically.

1. The second major portion of the Bible is known as the Prophets. Into what two groups are these books divided?
2. What was your introduction to the prophets as a child? What were your beliefs?
3. Do you see the prophets as predictors of Jesus? Explain your rationale.
4. How did the prophets differ from each other? What qualities and beliefs did they share?
5. How have the voices of the prophets been domesticated in our times?
6. Who were the prophets' indictments directed against and why? What were their social concerns?
7. How and why is the contemporary North American church blinded to the real message of the prophets regarding social justice?
8. In what ways do you see the prophets differently after reading this chapter? What messages do you now take seriously, but not literally?

Chapter 7

Reading Israel's Wisdom Again

This chapter explores Israel's wisdom books and their messages, dialogues, and conflicts.

1. What are the Wisdom books of the Bible?
2. Which is your favorite of the wisdom books and why?
3. Discuss some of the different types of proverbs.
4. What message(s) is Qoheleth trying to convey in Ecclesiastes?
5. What was the objective of the author of Job? What was he trying to show? How does he probe conventional wisdom?
6. What did you learn about daily life in ancient Israel from reading this chapter?
7. Compare the subject matter, tone and form of Israel's wisdom literature with the Pentateuch and the Prophets.

Chapter 8

Reading the Gospels Again

This chapter takes a fresh look at the gospels, focusing on how they were written and how they portray Jesus.

1. Discuss the two different ways the gospels can be read.
2. Discuss what the gospels say about the concerns and interpretations of the different communities of the early Christian movement.
3. How are the gospels of Matthew and Mark similar? How are they different?
4. Discuss the four differences between the gospel of John and the other gospels.
5. Discuss the different ways the gospels portray Jesus.
6. Does the author's way of reading and seeing the gospels make sense to you? Explain.
7. What new insights about the gospels did you receive from reading this chapter?

Chapter 9

Reading Paul Again

This chapter looks at the life of Paul, his writings, and his ministry.

1. Share your feelings about Paul. Did this chapter change your view of him? Explain.
2. Discuss Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. Why is this experience so important to understanding Paul's message?
3. What is known about Paul's life prior to his Damascus experience?
4. Discuss Paul's strategy as a missionary.
5. What purposes did Paul's letters serve? How are the letters "conversations in context?"
6. Discuss what the author speculates Paul may have said to Lydia. Do you agree? Explain your thoughts.
7. List and discuss some of the themes of Paul's post-Easter understanding.

Chapter 10

Reading Revelation Again

This chapter explores the many mysteries and interpretations of the book of Revelation.

1. What were your thoughts about Revelation prior to and after reading this chapter? What still puzzles you the most about it? What questions are raised after reading it?
2. What makes Revelation so controversial? What is the purpose of the book and what is known about the author?
3. Discuss the themes and emphasis of Revelation.
4. What evidence is there that the author was writing about the realities of his own day?
5. Who was the message of Revelation meant for? Was John writing to people of his time or to us today?
6. Discuss the main claim of a futurist interpretation of Revelation. What are its three premises?
7. If one reads Revelation as a description of past events, what themes or meanings does it have for us today? Why did the early church feel that it was an important book to include in the canon of the Bible?