

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Bible Tells Me So

by

Peter Enns

CHAPTER 1

1. There are many ways to approach the Bible: rulebook, instruction manual, script, cookbook, and legal contract (pp. 3, 23). Which way (or ways) have you viewed the Bible in the past? Has that changed over time?
2. For Christians, the Bible contains some strange laws, like being forbidden to trim the edges of your beard (Lev. 19:27) or wear clothes made of mixed fabrics (Lev. 19:19; p. 5). If you consider yourself a Christian, how do those laws relate to your life? Or do you think they are outdated and inapplicable?
3. Peter Enns writes, “I believe God wants us to take the Bible seriously, but I don’t believe he wants us to sup-

press our questions about it” (p. 8). What do you think that means? Is it possible to question something you take seriously? Besides the Bible, can you think of another example where this might be appropriate?

4. Enns shares some turning points in his Christian faith (pp. 11–18). Think about how your faith has grown and changed over your lifetime. What are some turning points that shifted how you understand and live out your faith?
5. When faced with new information that is likely true but might have consequences on the rest of your life, there are three options: ignore that information, push back and try to convince yourself that the information is false, or face the information and figure out what it might mean for your life (p. 19). Have you ever had an experience like that (for example, getting medical news, learning something new about a family member, or learning something about the Bible or science)? What did you do?
6. Enns mentions “three big controversial issues” that shaped his view of the Bible: God does a lot of killing in the Old Testament, what the Bible says happened often didn’t, and biblical writers often disagree (p. 25). How do you approach these issues? Has anyone you know left the faith because of such issues? How did you feel about it when he or she made that decision?

CHAPTER 2

1. When it comes to “getting God off the hook” for the genocide of the Canaanites, there have been four primary arguments: (1) God’s ways are higher than ours and we can’t understand them, so shut up about it; (2) waging war was necessary for survival; (3) sure, God killed Canaanites, but God is also really kind; and (4) the Canaanites were morally depraved, so they got what they deserved (pp. 41–50). Did you grow up reading those stories with one of these four views in mind? Though Enns rejects all four, are there any that make sense to you or that you agree with?
2. Enns’s advice on how to understand the Canaanite genocide is this: God never told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. They just thought he did (p. 54). What reaction do you have to this approach?
3. Rather than picking and choosing which verses to hang his hat on, Enns says, “I am respecting the Bible’s ancient voice, trying to understand what that ancient voice is saying, and then (and only then), make a decision as best as I can, about what to do with it. Where the ‘get God off the hook’ solutions all falter is that they are not asking ancient questions, but modern ones” (p. 54). What does it mean to respect “the Bible’s ancient voice” and ask “ancient questions”? In what ways is your community of faith today asking ancient or modern questions when it reads the Bible, and what do you see as a result?

4. There are many examples where archaeologists' evidence does not line up with what the Bible says (p. 59). What might it look like to revere the Bible but also accept archaeological evidence? Can it be done?
5. The ancient Israelites connected to God as what they were: an ancient tribal people (p. 61). How do we, in the twenty-first-century developed world, connect to God in ways that people from other times wouldn't or couldn't have?

CHAPTER 3

1. "All attempts to put the past into words are interpretations of the past, not 'straight history'. There is no such thing. Anywhere" (p. 75). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
2. Most communities of faith agree that we have to be careful not to make the Bible mean something just because we want it to mean that (p. 89). What assumptions do you bring to the Bible when you read it (for example, about what it is, how you're supposed to read it, whom it's addressed to, or what certain phrases or words mean)? Do you think it's possible not to bring assumptions to the Bible?
3. Enns suggests that Kings and Chronicles were intentionally crafted to make different points using the same historical events, like the movies *42* and Ken Burns's *Baseball* (p. 91). What points were the writers of Kings

and Chronicles trying to make? What do you think of biblical writers shaping historical events for their particular purposes?

4. How does recognizing that people were living outside Eden while the story of Adam and Eve was happening inside affect your view of Adam and Eve as a story of human origins (p. 113)?
5. Some people insist that if the Exodus didn't happen exactly as recorded in the book of Exodus, then we shouldn't trust the Bible when it tells us about the resurrection of Jesus (pp. 116–18). What do you think, and why?
6. Do you feel myth is a useful term for the Bible (p. 119)? Why or why not?
7. Genesis's story of creation, presented on pages 122–25, is not compatible with modern-day science. How do you think the Bible relates to science? What do you think about the creation story?

CHAPTER 4

1. Talking about Proverbs, Enns states, "If there's a sense in which the Bible 'tells us what to do,' I think [it is] as a model of the diverse and unscripted spiritual life, not as our step-by-step instructional guide" (p. 136). What do you think that means? How does that tell us what to do in some sense?

2. Proverbs 26:4–5 contains two contradictory sayings. However, it is apparent that the writers of the Old Testament were smart and intentional writers (pp. 137–38). Why do you think the writer put these verses back-to-back?
3. As you consider Enns’s comment on Proverbs 26:4–5 that “both of these proverbs are good, wise, and right—the question is when each is good, wise, and right” (pp. 137–38), what do you think biblical wisdom is? How is that similar to or different from the idea that the Bible is an instruction manual?
4. Ecclesiastes describes Qoheleth getting angry with God because life often feels meaningless, especially when we all die in the end (pp. 142–45). Can you think of a time when you were angry with God? Do you think it’s okay to voice your anger with God?
5. The Bible itself validates Israel’s belief in the existence of many gods, though it is always crystal clear that Israel’s God, YHWH, is the highest God (p. 153). Do you think it took a while for Israel to grasp the idea of there being only one God, since they came from a world where the existence of many gods was assumed?
6. In Genesis 18, God plans to destroy Sodom, but Abraham convinces him to spare the city if there are ten righteous people living there. In Exodus 32, God plans to destroy the Israelites for worshipping an idol, but Moses convinces him to spare his people (pp. 156–58).

What is comforting (or discomfoting) about the idea of God changing his mind?

CHAPTER 5

1. “For Jesus, interpreting and respecting Torah meant—when necessary—not following the script, but being creative and adapting the past to speak to changing circumstances in the present” (p. 182). Do you think we do the same thing when we ask what God wants us to do about stem cell research, cloning, or other issues the Bible doesn’t specifically address because the technology wasn’t yet available? If you think it’s a different situation, explain.
2. What are the implications of saying that Jesus is fully human (p. 188)? Does this view of Jesus make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?
3. Jesus read his Old Testament like a Jewish person of the first century. We likely read our Bible as citizens of the twenty-first century (p. 188). Do you think we all read the Bible differently based on our culture, experiences, and upbringing? What are the benefits of reading through our own lens? What are the drawbacks?

CHAPTER 6

1. Chapter 6 begins by asking us to imagine what it would be like to explain the iPhone to the inventor of the tele-

phone, Alexander Graham Bell. Enns concludes, “My only chance of getting Bell to grasp this otherworldly future phone would be by adapting his older language the best I could” (p. 194). How does this story relate to the story of Jesus as messiah?

2. What are some Jewish expectations for the messiah, and how did Jesus fail to live up to them (pp. 196–200)?
3. The New Testament writers had a personal experience with God—for most it was the resurrection, but for Paul, Jesus appeared in a blinding light—that caused them to think differently about what the Bible (specifically, Torah) means (pp. 199, 216–17). Have you ever had a personal experience with God that changed how you thought about him, the Bible, or the Christian life?
4. Though Matthew treats Hosea’s words as predicting Jesus’s infancy, Hosea actually seems to be speaking of past events in the life of Israel rather than prophesying about Jesus (p. 203). Before reading this, how did you understand prophecy as portrayed in the Bible? Does this change your thoughts about biblical prophecy? Why or why not?
5. Paul seems to say that God never intended people to live by the laws of the Old Testament forever; these laws were only valid until Jesus came (p. 223). Does that change your view of the Ten Commandments and other laws in the Old Testament that we believe Christians should live by?

CHAPTER 7

1. What does it mean for you that God is mysterious (p. 234)?
2. “The Bible is not, never has been, and never will be the center of the Christian faith” (p. 237). Would the faith tradition you grew up in agree or disagree? How do you feel about that statement now?
3. What do you think it means to live with Jesus, instead of the Bible, as the center of your faith? How might those be different (p. 237)?
4. “An unsettled faith is a maturing faith” (p. 238). Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. If you’re honest, what are you most afraid of in your spiritual life (p. 239)?
6. Do you think our family, friends, and church leaders, perhaps unintentionally, pressure us to believe in certain ways? Have you ever experienced pressure or pressured others to believe certain things (p. 240)?