

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian

by

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CHAPTER 1:

ENDING: A HYMN TO A SAVAGE GOD?

1. To give focus to the question the book seeks to answer, John Dominic Crossan states, “The biblical God is, on one hand, a God of nonviolent distributive justice and, on the other hand, a God of violent retributive justice. How do we reconcile these two visions?” (p. 18). What are your hopes as you begin studying this book?
2. How much have you wrestled with the seeming disconnect between divine violence and divine nonviolence in the Bible?

3. Have you considered the Bible as a whole, as Crossan suggests? What biblical themes seem to carry through the entire book?

CHAPTER 2: CENTERING: THE MEANING IN THE MIDDLE?

1. “The heartbeat of the Christian Bible is a recurring cardiac cycle in which the *asserted radicality of God’s non-violent distributive justice is subverted by the normalcy of civilization’s violent retributive justice*” (p. 28). Does our study of the Bible change when we consider this text as an interplay between divine and human action?
2. If a non-Christian person challenged you about the violence of God, would you feel prepared to respond? Is this something you’ve wrestled with before?

CHAPTER 3: CONSCIENCE

1. When we begin with the story of Gilgamesh as a matrix (pp. 44ff), how do we read and understand Genesis 2–3 differently—or correctly, according to Crossan?
2. “Our humanity, Genesis concludes, is not distinguished by being immortal, for that is an impossibility, but by being *moral*—and that is a responsibility” (p. 55). Crossan is speaking here about Adam and Eve discovering their conscience when they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Were you taught about morality

through Bible lessons? How does that influence your reading of Crossan's book?

3. Do you think most people would be surprised to learn that the word *sin* does not appear in the creation stories of Genesis (p. 57)? Were you? Why does it matter?

CHAPTER 4: VIOLENCE

1. "The normalcy of human civilization is not the inevitability of human nature" (p. 66). In other words, we were not created to be ruled by sin, even though we so often choose to live in ways that are the opposite of God's vision. Why is this Crossan's mantra in the book? How would we live differently if we agreed with this statement?
2. One of the headings in chapter 4 is "Sin Crouches but You Will Rule over It" (p. 62). Crossan notes that God does not say we could, might, should, or must rule over sin, but that we *will* rule over it. In your faith formation, did you learn about sin as an internal, irresistible force or as "an external feral feline that crouches to attack you" (p. 63)? How does this notion of sin tie in with Crossan's main points?

CHAPTER 5: CREATION AND COVENANT

1. On page 86, Crossan defines *covenant* this way: “Covenant in the biblical tradition is, therefore, a religio-political, religio-social, and religio-economic commitment between God and the world as a macro-cosm or God and Israel as an experimental micro-cosm.” How does Crossan use the Hittite treaties as metaphor, model, and matrix for his definition of *covenant*? What does it teach us about the relationship between divinity and humanity (pp. 84–86)?
2. Violence in the world begets violence against the world (p. 87). For example, we use the story of Noah’s flood to show how God responded to the world’s violence with a violent act. How does Crossan show us that this is not the end of God’s story?
3. What are you learning about the way the Bible came together from different traditions and sources?
4. The Sabbath day established distributive justice—where all God’s people get a fair share of all God’s earth—as the rhythm of time and the metronome of history (p. 78). Do you think that if our society still practiced Sabbath we would remain more closely tied to God’s vision of distributive justice? What would this mean for our relationships with our neighbors?

CHAPTER 6: BLESSING AND CURSE

1. Crossan prepares us for chapter 6 by previewing an upcoming shift in biblical theology. “The covenantal pendulum swings powerfully from the Priestly to the Deuteronomic tradition” (p. 88). Do you typically think of pendulum swings when it comes to the Bible? How does Crossan help us see that blessing and curse were each emphasized during various stages of biblical thought?
2. “To put it another way: this book’s God of distributive justice is dominated by its God of retributive justice” (p. 90). In other words, the book of Deuteronomy contains more curses than blessings. How would you explain the reason for this to a confirmation student?
3. Crossan advises, “Read [the Bible] carefully and thoughtfully, recognize radicality’s *assertion*, expect normalcy’s *subversion*, and respect the honesty of a story that tells the truth” (p. 98). How has this book helped you read the Bible in a fresh way? What have you discovered?

CHAPTER 7: PROPHECY AND PRAYER

1. Crossan begins chapter 7 by explaining prophetic identity as a movement from divine covenant to divine council to divine complaint. How do the prophetic

books of the Bible exemplify Crossan's main point of the book, that God's original peaceful vision is desecrated by human intervention?

2. "The powers that be do not even understand the accusation, do not recognize the problem, do not acknowledge their responsibility. They say, as it were: 'We are about power. Who brought up this justice thing?'" (p. 116). What point is Crossan trying to make by distinguishing between power and justice? How is the power-versus-justice debate particularly contemporary?
3. What does Crossan mean when he says that the Prophetic and Psalmic traditions are extremely ambiguous on the character of God?
4. "We Christians must read both traditions [Priestly and Deuteronomic], accept and follow their divine assertion, understand and not follow their human subversion, and appreciate the biblical honesty that retained that full dialectic of yes-and-no, expansion-and-contraction, vision-and-negation" (p. 118). How do you imagine that your Bible reading in the future will be influenced by what you've learned about various biblical traditions in Crossan's book? How do you understand "biblical honesty"?

CHAPTER 8: WISDOM AND KINGDOM

1. What ancient and biblical history does Crossan assume we know? Have you been taught this before? What new historical information have you learned from Crossan?
2. Crossan poses a “delicate question”: “Does the Wisdom tradition have the same passion for distributive justice as does the Prophetic tradition, or is it a passion for distributive charity?” (p. 125). Why should we keep this question in mind as we make choices about our church’s ministries—for example, whether to open a food bank or advocate regarding the root causes of poverty?
3. “It is surely long overdue for us to rethink both the theory of divine punishment and the resultant practice of pleading for forgiveness and crying out for mercy throughout the Christian tradition” (p. 126). How radical does this statement sound to you? What does Crossan propose Christians should be doing rather than focusing on divine punishment and begging for mercy? Is this the way you think about God?
4. What have you learned so far on this journey through the Bible with Crossan? What strategies have you found for deciphering *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*?

CHAPTER 9: ISRAEL AND THE CHALLENGE OF ROME

1. What did you learn about nonviolent resistance in this chapter?
2. How does Crossan explain the messianic matrix in which both John and Jesus lived and died (pp. 151–55)? Why is it important?
3. How does the Golden Age of Israel compare to the Golden Age of Rome?
4. “By now you can probably guess my questions” (p. 155). What would you guess Crossan’s questions to be? How have the same questions been asked and answered throughout the book?

CHAPTER 10: JESUS AND THE RADICALITY OF GOD

1. Answer the question that Crossan previewed in the last chapter and presents here: “How *precisely* was the ruling style of God different from that of Rome; how *exactly* were God’s justice and peace different from those of Rome?” (p. 155).
2. “The old paradigm imagined an imminent divine intervention; the new one envisioned a present divine and human collaboration” (p. 166). Or, as Archbishop Tutu said, “God, without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot.” As you consider the ways you live out your

faith, how much do you think is up to you, and how much is up to God? Have you noticed that the way you live out your faith is different from the way others do?

3. “For Christians, God is revealed in Christ, but Christ is revealed in Jesus” (p. 171). What do you think Crossan means by this statement? How do you understand and live it?

CHAPTER 11: CHRIST AND THE NORMALCY OF CIVILIZATION

1. Where do you see *escalatory violence* (p. 173) happening around us? Why does it matter that we get this biblical question about God’s violence sorted out?
2. Throughout the book, as he walks us through the Bible, Crossan reminds us of the main question the book seeks to solve. On page 185 he gives the answer—“if the biblical Christ is the norm, criterion, and discriminant of the Christian Bible, than the historical Jesus is the norm, criterion, and discriminant of the biblical Christ.” Do you have eyes to see this answer? What parts of the book will you reread to better understand?
3. “Did Jesus change his mind, or did the Gospels change their Jesus?” (p. 178). How does Crossan answer this question in comparing four examples from Mark’s Gospel and the Q Gospel (pp. 175–78)? If the Gospel writers can change their Jesus, how do we know what to believe about Jesus?

CHAPTER 12: ROME AND THE CHALLENGE OF CAESAR

1. What did you learn about Roman history in this chapter? Why does learning the history of Rome help us better understand the biblical landscape?
2. “Throughout this book we have seen again and again how the matrix of time, place, and situation slowly but surely subverts assertions of divine radicality back into claims of human normalcy” (p. 200). Think of a few examples of how our world normalizes God’s radical message. Who are some people you know who are actually living out God’s radical message of nonviolence?
3. “Beneath that seismic conflict of Christian Judaism and Roman imperialism was the grinding collision of history’s two great tectonic plates: the normalcy of civilization’s program of peace through victory against the radicality of God’s program of peace through justice” (p. 201). Had you read history in this way before? How does it change how you understand what was happening in these stories?

CHAPTER 13: PAUL AND THE RADICALITY OF CHRIST

1. What did you learn about Bible history and context by reading Crossan’s book? Had you ever read through the

Bible following one thread before? What new biblical perspective did you gain by doing so?

2. Crossan previews the final chapter of the book by implying that Paul's theology was subverted, just as Jesus's was (p. 216). What do you imagine to be the *consequent sufferings* mentioned on page 217? How were they life changing for Christians?

CHAPTER 14 : PAUL AND THE NORMALCY OF EMPIRE

1. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling not because *God* will punish you if you fail, but because *Rome* will punish you if you succeed" (p. 219). What does Crossan mean by this? How does this statement match or not match your theology? Take a few minutes to discuss or write down your thoughts.
2. After working your way through this book, do you feel better prepared to respond to a question about the violence of God in the Bible?
3. What would you like to say to your teacher, John Dominic Crossan, after traveling through the Bible with him on this quest to resolve the violent and nonviolent God question?
4. To whom would you recommend or not recommend this book? Why?