A MOST PECULIAR BOOK

The Inherent Strangeness of the Bible

Kristin Swenson

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For Leland and Lowell

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This book has been a long time coming. If I'm honest about it, I suppose it began back when, as a churchgoing kid, I started stumbling and fumbling past the Bible's internal contradictions and bewildering passages. At first, I thought it was just me, some failure on my part to see the seamless whole and consistent peace-and-loveliness that I'd assumed must be true of God's Word, the Good Book, Holy Scripture, and all that.

I'm grateful to my parents always, Cec and Dick, and to those senior members of my family and early faith community who demonstrated both respect and even love for the Bible while at the same time honoring the kind of questioning inquiry that inevitably arises when one reads that most peculiar book. I'm lucky to have landed among them. St. Olaf College, where I majored in both biology and religion, elegantly synthesizes rigorous study in the hard sciences with a vibrant, dynamically lived Christianity. I'm grateful for the education and encouragement I received there, not least their emphasis on orienting one's learning to be of service to others, including the nonhuman with whom we share this glorious planet.

The matter of learning—both the ongoing business of gaining information and the self-struggle of making sense of things with compassion and responsibility—always depends on the wisdom of

others. I am grateful to those who have graced my life and learning with the fruits of their own work. This includes not only the scholars of centuries past that I've had the privilege to study and learn from but also those family—my sisters and their families, in-laws, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents – and friends too many to name, who have generously shared with me their own knowledge and candor about the Bible. Our conversations informed this project.

This book really began to take the shape you see today thanks to OUP editor Theo Calderara, whose interest, expressed years ago, in our doing a book together led to conversations about just what that book might be. Here it is. Well, with inevitable shortcomings and probable failings, all of which are most definitely my own.

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INTRODUCTION

An Arranged Marriage

I have a confession to make. But I'm worried that what you, an intelligent and discerning reader, will hear is not exactly what I mean. Then you'll close this book and put it right back on the shelf. Yet what I want to tell you—and the fact that it feels like a confession—is what drives this entire project. So, here it is:

I love the Bible.

That statement gives me the willies. It's something millions of Americans would nod right along with because it sounds so simple to understand. But my love for the Bible is not a tacit acceptance of everything in it as lessons or truths for immediate application. Not hardly. This is not a love for facile public display. It's not of the swept-off-my-feet, love-at-first-sight variety, but rather more like the complicated love that might develop after decades in a marriage. An arranged marriage. I grew up with the Bible in an open-minded, garden-variety Protestant congregation. And I've come to love the Bible for all sorts of reasons, including some of the same reasons that can make it problematic and exasperating, even for reasons that make me disagree with it.

Look closely. Besides texts of lofty wisdom, inspiration, comfort, and guidance, the Bible contains bewildering archaisms,

inconsistencies, questionable ethics, and a herky-jerky narrative style. Yet those features barely get a passing glance these days. Some believers simply explain them away, while nonbelievers use them as a reason to dismiss the Bible entirely. This book looks squarely at what's so weird, difficult, and disconcerting both about and in the Bible, and in the process shows how those qualities can actually enrich one's relationship, religious or not, to the text. I am not trying to convert anybody to anything except to learning. I'm committed to providing information, digging into the text and its background, and sharing questions of my own that might resonate with you. Those questions are both what make me love the Bible and what make that love so complicated.

For starters, the Bible is a cacophonous gathering of disparate voices. Not only are there different books within The Book, but they come from a range of places, from the Dead Sea to Rome, Egypt to Antioch, from tiny towns and huge metropolises, rural hillsides and palace halls, prisons and podiums, and from a wider-still range of times—spanning as much as 1,500 years. The Bible covers subjects so vast that it begins with creation itself. The people responsible for putting down those words, the people responsible for passing them along, for collecting and canonizing what we have, and the people who have translated original ancient texts for modern readers come from and reflect a dizzying range of times and places, all of which influence the way we read what we now call the Bible.

And yet, despite all of that, this collection of texts is said to be "the word of God." Think about that. *The* singular, one expression, *of God*. A person could spend a lifetime unpacking only that. Many have.

Which brings us to another of the Bible's compelling qualities: it champions no single, simple portrait of God. That is one of the things I love most about it. Though we may wish to define a "biblical God," the better to predict and manage, the Bible refuses to lay out a systematic theology. Even the popular generalization that the God of the Old Testament is vengeful while the New Testament God

is forgiving doesn't hold up to scrutiny.[1] God as presented in the Bible is simply far more complicated than these reductive efforts can sustain.

Within only the first couple of its pages, the Bible portrays God as both a cosmically distant creator of no single gender (Genesis 1) *and* a guy walking around an orchard, chatting with people (Genesis 2). Read further, and you find a God who regrets, delights, mourns, angers, protects, punishes, soothes, and demands. God is an intimate lover and a remote king, likened to a mother bird and a cuckolded husband. The depictions are nearly endless. And that's just the Hebrew Bible. If you include the New Testament in your Bible (i.e., if you're Christian), then you get yet another variation on God as coming to earth as a poor Jewish man in Palestine, and at least four variations on that (thanks to the Gospels). In the Bible, God is responsible for both good and evil but is also categorically opposed to evil. In other words, biblical images of God defy any and every limitation, which (while exasperating) feels right. According to the Bible, God is far too big to be just one thing.

It should come as no surprise, then, even if you have never read the Bible, to find that it is full of holes. From the very beginning, the story leaves us modern readers scratching our heads. For example, where did the supposedly first children—two boys—get their wives? The Bible doesn't say. Those responsible for delivering the Bible that we have apparently didn't always care about the kinds of things that we, who expect a story to proceed with a certain narrative logic, get hung up on.

Just how many times does a patriarch pass his wife off as his sister? How could approximately two and a half million people, with all their animals, collectively leave Egypt to wander in the Sinai Desert for forty years?[2] We are told that they drew water from a rock and that food miraculously appeared, but practically speaking, that's a whole lot of people with dependent animals in a barren space for a very long time. Then there's the man swallowed by a fish and vomited up three days later to resume his God-given activity, which

is not even the most unbelievable part of that story. How is it that, for a while, Israel's most respected leader was a woman? And where did she go? The Bible is blasé about life spans of hundreds of years and a talking donkey and why an earthly king would have heard of, much less worried about, some poor Jewish infant. What happened to Jesus between birth and age thirty? And what did the apostles' wives and children do while they were on the road? These are simply not matters that the text is all that concerned about.

The Bible's silences invite readers to set aside their assumptions and engage in further study with intelligence, imagination, and curiosity. This book aims to help in that endeavor.

Which leads to yet another reason for why I love the Bible: as an object of study, it's inexhaustible. Sure, it's really big and the stories and poems and laws and all provide rich ground for interpretation, sermonizing, and such. But learning *about* the Bible is equally inexhaustible—and vitally important. From understanding the historical, social, economic, and theological contexts out of which these texts emerged to examining how the literary shape of the texts informs their meanings today, the Bible is the ultimate subject for interdisciplinary scholarship. Those who study the Bible for a living draw on the sciences (social and hard), literary arts, philosophy, history, philology, theology, and more.

Finally, the Bible invites—nay, *demands*—interaction, even argument. And I don't simply mean argument about what the Bible says or means (though that's inevitable) but argument with the text itself. For the qualities I have cited—its disparate voices and images of God, its fissures and cracks and the endless ways and things to learn about it—the Bible defies the simplistic treatment of so-called literalism. (I say "so-called" because what exactly does it mean to "read the Bible literally," especially if what one is reading is itself a translation from the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek?) The Bible's diversity of perspectives and tone, not to say those texts in blatant disagreement with each other, actually models conversation, dialogue, and debate. It could issue no bolder invitation to engagement,

no more compelling demand to bring the best of one's faculties to bear on any interpretation of it.

Take the book in your hands as an opportunity to step outside assumptions about dogma, traditional interpretations, and received opinion. Read it as if in conversation, and argue just as much as you like, as much as you can stand. Much of what we think about the Bible is actually received ideas and assumptions, passed along through other sources, themselves interpretations: holiday traditions, music and art, pop culture, children's stories. You'll be surprised how many things "the Bible says" don't actually appear anywhere in the Bible. I want to return us to the text itself, in all its oddness—to show how strange is some of what's familiar and to make the engagement inviting again.

Some of what you find here may be old hat; some of it might be new but easily digested; and some of it might make you a little (or more than a little) uncomfortable. I hope you'll wrestle with that discomfort and in the process discover a richer way to think about the Good Book, maybe even about thinking itself. I hope that you'll feel empowered to engage biblical texts with nuance and deepened appreciation, and also with the confidence to be not merely a blank slate on which it writes the old stuff but an agent in the conversation, to "gird up your loins" and be a partner with the text in the business of its meaning-making.

A brief aside: There are many more head-scratching oddities, absurdities, and exasperating lacunae in the Bible than could possibly fit in this modest book. What I've tried to do is show and discuss some of the most popular or glaring and in the process offer ways for readers to deal with others. For good or ill, wittingly or not, what I offer here is inevitably informed by my circumstances: my scholarship has focused on the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament—a collection I've discovered to be far richer in the kinds of things we're hungry for (love, forgiveness, compassion, and beauty, for example) than many readers assume. And my personal religious history is Protestant Christian. Consequently, readers may want more New

Testament discussion than they'll find here (and more attention to texts of the Apocrypha, canonical to Christians of other stripes). Add that the Hebrew Bible is a lot longer than the New Testament, and you'll find that I've included more references from that collection than from the New Testament. I fear that may feed, ironically, into a presumption that this book actually seeks to dispel: the simplistic (and anti-Semitic) notion that contrasts a "bad" Old Testament (Judaism) with a "good" New Testament (Christianity). At any rate, my choices of biblical texts for inclusion, much less my discussions of them, will not satisfy everyone. I hope that readers' interest in the subject will lead them to further learning. A final caveat: because I've tried to include especially familiar figures and stories, readers will find references to some of them in more than one chapter, reflecting different issues and concerns.

If you're someone who's comfortable simply saying that you love the Bible, then this book is for you. If you're someone who could never in a million years imagine saying that you love the Bible, then this book is for you too. If you're somewhere in the middle, well, there's a lot of good reading out there. I'm happy to issue recommendations. Kidding! I hope you'll all stay with me on this strange journey.

In that spirit, here we go.

PART I

A Book Like No Other