Progressive Christians should read the Bible

It’s a rich, multivocal library. And we can’t afford to be ignorant of a book that’s being weaponized against vulnerable people.

by Debie Thomas in the March 2025 issue
Published on March 7, 2025

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My childhood Bible was a formidable thing. I carried it around in a quilted tote bag equipped with extra pockets for highlighters, pencils, bookmarks, and notepads. I had an elaborate color-coding system for the highlighters— yellow for God’s promises, pink for the divine injunctions I needed to follow, and blue for the verses I found comforting when I felt sad or scared. The margins were filled with my tween wonderings: Where did Cain’s wife come from? How did all of those animals coexist

on the ark without eating each other? Did Jesus know who he really was when he was little?

I read my Bible voraciously, and I read it literally. Raised in a bibliocentric tradition, I was taught that God's word is perfect, devoid of inconsistency or error. Every word in it is intentionally chosen by God, and every event recorded in it is historically accurate. So Jonah really did spend three days inside a giant fish, and there really was a catastrophic flood that engulfed all of planet Earth, and there really is a "lake of fire" where non-Christians will someday gnash their teeth.

I was also taught to read the Bible as a straightforward and definitive rule book that covers all bases when it comes to daily living. The acronym my faith community unwittingly affirmed was B-I-B-L-E: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

When I look back now on the years I spent lovingly carrying that pink purveyor of certainty around like a talisman, I feel many things. Tenderness for my girlhood fervor. Envy for the innocence I brought to my devotional reading. Anger for all the questions I wasn't allowed to ask. Grief for the unconditional affection I once held for the book—an affection I find much harder to access now.

As with most everyone who goes through a faith deconstruction, my inherited ways of engaging the Bible fell apart when I was a young adult. It became clear that literalism couldn't hold water, that not everything in the Bible is prescriptive, that God will not be contained or constrained by anything we humans craft in God's name, and that there are plenty of life circumstances for which the Bible offers no instructions whatsoever. I felt duped, and I stopped reading. I no longer knew what the Bible was or what it was for. I no longer knew who I was in its presence. I decided I would never allow myself to be tricked again.

It was a painful loss. The Bible had been my closest companion for years: my refuge, my confidence, my sure pathway to God. Letting it go felt like death.

Philosophers and theologians sometimes speak of "a second naïveté" in matters of faith. Paul Ricoeur describes this as "a return to the joy of our first naïveté, but now totally new, inclusive, and mature." Richard Rohr suggests that it's a kind of childlike simplicity we return to after much wandering—the easiest way to continue the journey of faith "without becoming angry, split, alienated, or ignorant." A second naïveté, Rohr insists, "is the very goal of mature adulthood and mature religion."

My work now is to cultivate this second naïveté in relation to the Bible. To return to scripture with all the tools of historical and literary criticism I have learned, without allowing those tools to become barriers. To reintegrate heart and mind, soul and body. To trust that the God who first met me in the pages of scripture can still meet and nourish me now.

It grieves me that so many progressive Christians shy away from this work, choosing biblical illiteracy instead. As if the book can only be credibly opened by those who dissect it in divinity schools or wield it with collars around their necks. The truth is, we can't afford to be ignorant of the Bible at this cultural moment when it is being weaponized against vulnerable people. Loving our neighbors wisely and well means cultivating a deep familiarity and confidence around the word of God. Whether we like it or not, the Bible is in the cultural marketplace, and the conversations it generates there have life-and-death consequences. It is incumbent upon us to participate intelligently in those conversations.

So how do I approach the Bible now, in this, my second naïveté? I wrestle with it. I contend with it, chew on it, argue with it, question it. I tell God honestly when it delights or appalls me. I believe that God's Spirit is in my bewilderment and rage as much as she is in my awe and gratitude. If a story in scripture breaks my heart, I ask if it breaks God's heart, too. If I see biblical characters invoking God's name to justify horrific acts, I don't assume that God is OK with those acts. Instead, I howl with God in sacred indignation.

In short, I no longer approach the Bible as a rule book, science manual, or history text. I see it as a rich, multivocal, multigenerational library of conversations about God and with God, undertaken by flawed people who cared about seeking and serving the Divine and who got the whole business wrong as often as they got it right. I see the Bible as both devotional and instructive in that it offers us an amazing record of an evolving, seeking, lurching faith. Three steps forward, two steps back. A broken humanity stumbling toward an ever-gracious God who beckons us ever forward.

And finally, I see the Bible as the opening moves in a conversation that is dynamic and ongoing. The book is open, not closed, and that is why we need to keep reading it—however fraught and complicated our reading might be. Its next pages await our participation. They will be written across our very lives.