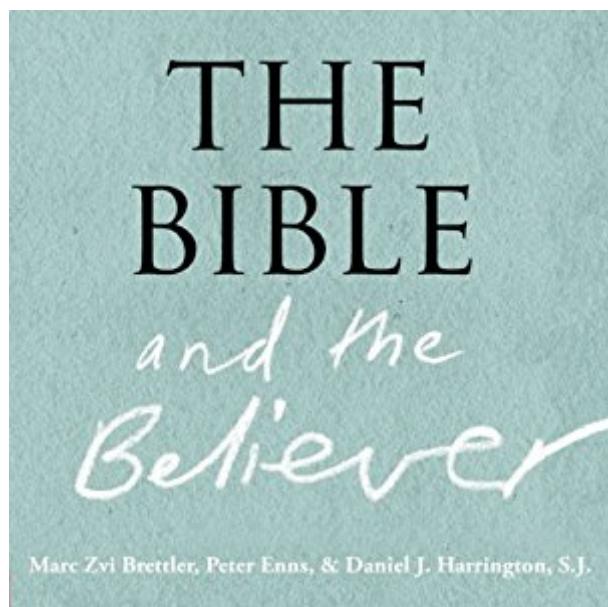


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# The Bible And The Believer: How To Read The Bible Critically And Religiously



## Synopsis

Can the Bible be approached both as sacred scripture and as a historical and literary text? For many people, it must be one or the other. How can we read the Bible both ways? *The Bible and the Believer* brings together three distinguished biblical scholars--one Jewish, one Catholic, and one Protestant--to illustrate how to read the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament critically and religiously. Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington tackle a dilemma that not only haunts biblical scholarship today, but also disturbs students and others exposed to biblical criticism for the first time, either in university courses or through their own reading. Failure to resolve these conflicting interpretive strategies often results in rejection of either the critical approach or the religious approach--or both. But the authors demonstrate how biblical criticism--the process of establishing the original contextual meaning of biblical texts with the tools of literary and historical analysis--need not undermine religious interpretations of the Bible, but can in fact enhance them. They show how awareness of new archeological evidence, cultural context, literary form, and other tools of historical criticism can provide the necessary preparation for a sound religious reading. And they argue that the challenges such study raises for religious belief should be brought into conversation with religious tradition rather than deemed grounds for dismissing either that tradition or biblical criticism. Guiding readers through the history of biblical exegesis within the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant faith traditions, *The Bible and the Believer* bridges an age-old gap between critical and religious approaches to the Old Testament.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 6 hours and 38 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: December 17, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00H860GWG

Best Sellers Rank: #56 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Religion & Spirituality > Bibles #573 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Sacred Writings > Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) #635 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Criticism &

## Customer Reviews

This book has the same format as the 3/4/5 Views books. After an Introduction, the three authors (Jewish, Roman Catholic & Protestant biblical scholars) present a description their faith's views of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in a 30- to 40-page essay, including an example of biblical criticism in practice. Each essay is followed by brief comments by the other two scholars and a Further Reading section. Jewish biblical scholar Marc Zvi Brettler presents the Jewish view that the interpretation rather than the biblical text itself is primary. He then describes the many facets of Jewish interpretation over the centuries. The difficult historical problems in the Torah are "not a core problem for Judaism because for Jews the Bible is not primarily a book of history to be interpreted literally." In addition, "according to Judaism, biblical books were canonized because they were authoritative, not because they were perceived as being divinely inspired." Roman Catholic biblical scholar Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. points out that Catholics "view the Bible as primarily a witness to a person, Jesus of Nazareth." "Catholics believe the Bible was written by human authors under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the word of God in human language". Catholic theologians tend to hold the view that the Vatican Council taught the "limited inerrancy" (only what pertains to salvation is inerrant) of Scripture. Catholic interpretation of Scripture is more centralized in the Magisterium (the Teaching Office of the Church). Protestant biblical scholar Peter Enns points out that "in Protestantism the Bible is pressed into the role of supreme religious authority in a way that Scripture may have trouble supporting." He then discusses three important factors: (1) The Reformation rallying cry of 'sola scriptura'; (2) the nature of the Christian Bible; and (3) Protestant identity coming out of the 19th-century "battles for the Bible." He suggests that "bridging the gap between critical readings of Scripture and religious readings will require reorienting readers' expectations of how they feel God's word should behave." Enns concludes by discussing some lessons he ha learned along the way: (1) The Bible is not the center of the Christian faith. That position belongs to God; (2) Fear can quickly derail the dialogue between faith and critical readings of Scripture; and (3) An unsettled faith is a maturing faith. The follow-up comments on each essay by the other two authors are particularly interesting in that they highlight the similarities and the differences in approaches to Scripture by the three religious groups. I found that this book to be very worthwhile for anyone interested in current perspectives on the Bible.

This fine volume will be very helpful to anyone interested in how believers who look to the Old

Testament for fundamental guidance in their religious/spiritual journey can still do so, even in the light of serious challenges to biblical interpretation presented by more than one hundred years of increasingly convincing critical analysis of scripture. It may even be a lifeline for believers who feel their faith wavering because of what is seen as an effective critical assault on the veracity of scripture in general and the Old Testament in particular. The authors represent three broad groups of believers - Jewish (Marc Zvi Brettler), Catholic (Daniel J. Harrington S.J.) and Protestant (Peter Enns). Each one has the experience and academic standing to ably represent their community, and each one provides convincing evidence that they too are believers, within their particular tradition. This then, ultimately, is a series of essays on the impact of and some healthy responses to biblical criticism for believers by believers. From literary, interpretative and faith affirming viewpoints, it is fascinating to explore the differences and similarities embodied in the three traditions. The impacts of more than a century of critical study of scripture have been significant, and the ways of dealing with these challenges, while remaining faithful, are varied across the three traditions. Also, for each tradition, the nature of the impacts are significantly different to begin with, something not always obvious until you have each tradition's approach to scripture clearly explained. In fact, the fine explanations of these approaches offer fascinating insights in their own right, especially for those who enjoy comparative studies. There is much to be learned by comparing closely related traditions, but I will take a different tack in this review. As a Protestant Christian, the chapter by Peter Enns was the most helpful to me. This is not to downplay how interesting I found all three chapters, as well as the commentary on each chapter by the other two authors. It is just that I can comment with greater confidence on the utility of the chapter that deals with my own tradition. Enns, writes very clearly, a hallmark of all of his books. His background spans several Protestant traditions and he has years of experience in at least two of them. He is also more familiar than most Protestants with the Jewish approach to scripture because of his doctoral work under two of the best Jewish biblical scholars of current times. His chapter entitled "Protestantism and Biblical Criticism: One Perspective on a Difficult Dialogue" is a clear call for Protestants, particularly the more conservative ones but really all of us, to do a better job of bringing critical and religious readings of scripture into dialogue. After bravely describing what Protestantism is and then, even more bravely, what its view of the Bible might be, Enns shines light on a central paradox this way, "So, can these Protestants read the Bible religiously and critically? They can - and, indeed, I would argue that they must - but they will need to make their way through a paradox." The paradox, simply put, is to use the famous Protestant skills for

challenging the status quo to seriously review our own status quo with respect to our views of scripture. A constant theme in Enns's chapter is how we put ourselves in a difficult corner when we approach scripture with our mind already made up regarding what scripture is, what it must accomplish and how it must and must not behave. To get out of such corners, we must first understand that we actually do approach scripture with unscriptural expectations and even presuppositions, and then decide what we are going to do about it. His chapter basically fleshes out ways we might better navigate these troubled waters..The three great obstacles that must be dealt with are, according to Enns, the extremes of "sola scriptura" or, our presuppositions re the nature of the Christian Bible, and finally, Protestant responses (mostly defensive overreactions) to the watershed events of 1859, 1876 and 1878, all of which raise important questions about the historical reliability of scripture. After reviewing these challenges and our defensive responses to them he concludes, as mentioned above, "The way forward" is to decide to create a culture where critical self-reflection is valued rather than seen as a threat. Additionally, he relies on his co-author's contributions to suggest that Protestants have much to gain by paying closer attention to a "dialogical approach" to scripture (Jewish) with less attention on "getting it right" and to encourage and develop a more contemplative approach (Catholic); both of course as important additions, not at replacements. He is in no way counselling Protestants to become Jewish or Catholic, but he is counselling us to learn from a wider range of believers than we often have managed to do. As for provocative quotes, it wouldn't be a Peter Enns essay if these were found wanting. Here is a good one: "Spiritual masters, not only of Christianity but also of other faiths, are quick to remind us that living in your head and attempting to control others and God, even through Scripture, hinders communication with God and spiritual growth. It is a great Protestant irony that one's devotion to Scripture can wind up being a spiritual barrier." And, to reiterate a point made twice already in this review, when speaking of the way forward that he proposes, Enns opines, "Some might say that such a program would compromise the very Protestant spirit. I disagree. I think it calls upon the true spirit of the Reformation but turned inward, not on the enemy lurking outside the walls." The Protestant predicament, however, is that looking inward may also be the hardest step to take. I will resist going on to describe his brief discussion on inspiration and incarnation, well covered in his book by that title, or his very helpful summary of the way NT authors handle OT texts when they wanted to make a Christian point (Hint:

they used the same approach that their Jewish brothers of the time used), or his summary of archaeological and related challenges to our understanding of the Bible as history. The number of highlights that I made in the latter section tell me that this review will have no end if I don't show some discipline at this point. But do not miss the fine discussion surrounding the Red Sea, chaos, opposition to YHWH's will and all the wonderful verses that feed into this fascinating discussion. My final point is that Enns' whole argument is like a Russian doll. There are things within things, within things. After reading this essay, you will find it difficult not to at least attempt to think about all of this from many perspectives at the same time. Our encounter with scripture, if we follow Enns' advice, will no longer be compartmentalized. We will challenge ourselves to think on many levels at once, and will still find spiritual and intellectual nourishment at every turn, perhaps more than ever before.

Amazing book has helped me tremendously in my studies throughout Seminary. The format is wonderful and an honest look from each author's perspective helps me be honest with my own self on some long-held beliefs. Recommended book for everyone

The traditional understanding of higher criticism from the Evangelical viewpoint is that it is a priori a destroyer of biblical authority. Here we have three views, Catholic, Jewish, and Evangelical that support both the historical critical method and a reverence for the biblical text. The interplay of ideas and traditions among the three is enlightening in itself. A useful volume in countering parochialism.

A Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jewish scholar walk into a bar...and have a respectful and enlightening discussion about biblical interpretation in each of the three traditions represented.

I found this book fun and helpful. It gives you well rounded views. Buy this book. For more reviews check out [Amateurtheologians.com](http://Amateurtheologians.com)

Very thought provoking work. Perspectives are presented in a fashion beneficial to the serious student of religion/biblical studies or to those with a more casual interest. Insightful information.

Very interesting and thought provoking book. As a protestant it was very interesting reading this

book which combines a Roman Catholic theologian, A Jewish theologian and a Protestant. It gave me much more appreciation and respect for what we have in common.

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