



# does <sup>the</sup> bible tell me <sup>so?</sup>

HOW  
AMERICANS  
MISREAD  
THE  
GOOD  
BOOK

BY ANN MONROE



**A**

AMERICA IS IN THE GRIP OF A BIBLICAL frenzy. Books claiming to contain divine instructions fill bookstore shelves (one popular set is actually called the *God's Little Instruction Book* series). Athletes, who used to just play ball while fundamentalists in the crowd held up signs pointing television viewers to John 3:16, are now shouting biblical slogans themselves. Boxer Evander Holyfield even credited Jesus Christ with his world heavyweight victory. Forty-two percent of Americans believe the Bible is the literal word of God, up almost 5 percent since 1987.

Some of this Bible-thumping gets a bit goofy. A former country music promoter is building an amusement park, God's Wonderful World, featuring a visit to hell complete with blasts of heated air from below. And some of it's scary, because religious fundamentalists are not just preaching their version of biblical values, they're beating the rest of the country over the head with them. Ending welfare, praying in public schools, teaching creationism, eliminating "special treatment" for gays—the whole gamut of politically conservative rallying cries comes wrapped in a biblical halo: It's God's will, and here's the big black book to prove it.

Mainstream religious folk have tried to fight back. Organizations such as the National Council of Churches and the National Council of Jewish Women attack conservative policies. But whatever the political success of these organizations (lately, it's been depressingly low), on the biblical front they've lost the battle. Americans may love the Bible or loathe it. But for the most part, they read it the same way (when they read it at all): as the manifesto of a God who has a lot of laws and a definite inclination to punish those who don't follow them.

Even nonbelievers see it that way. Take New Yorker John Hart, who joined a church Bible study in part to understand the enemy. "One of the big problems is this sense of moral certitude," he says. "There is a God, and God makes rules, and this is what happens when the rules don't get obeyed."

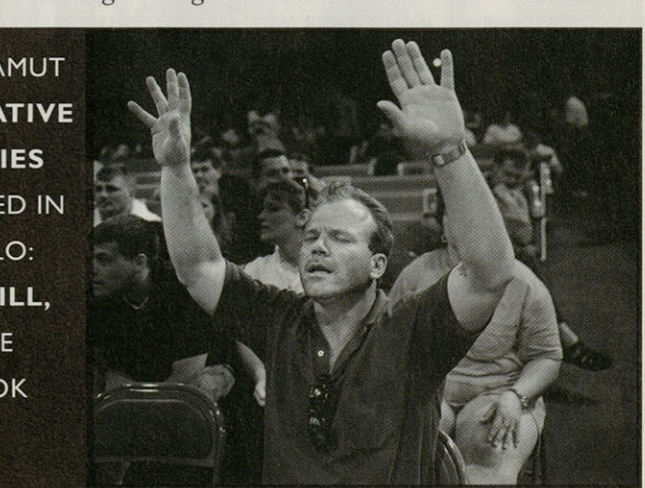
Fundamentalists argue smugly that liberals are losers when it comes to the Bible because they're just plain wrong. But there's an eclectic mix of scholars and writers who don't buy that explanation. Liberals have lost the biblical battle, these scholars say, because, even while they reject conservative interpretations of the Bible, they've been unable to shake free of conservative assumptions about the Bible.

Americans—and not just conservatives—are by nature fundamentalists, says Bruce Bawer, a poet, literary critic, and author of the forthcoming book *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*. "Anything that's not useful is without meaning," he says. "The whole country was settled by people who had to

be very pragmatic. When we read the Bible, if a statement has a noun and a verb, we want to believe it's literally true and use it in some way."

That makes the Bible a prickly document. Most of the stories in the Bible—God's creation of the world in six days, Moses' bringing the Israelites out of Egypt by parting the Red Sea, and of course all of Jesus' miracles—are, to a scientific worldview, highly improbable. And a lot of what God is described as doing, from demanding that Abraham sacrifice his only son to striking a pair of early Christians dead because they wanted to hang on to some of their own property, seems downright nasty.

With so much in the Bible to be disliked or discounted, there seems to be little left for liberals to do but engage in the same kind of moral prescriptiveness the religious right has made so unattractive. "Fundamentalists buy into truth as factuality, but Christian liberals have also tended to accept the idea that factuality and truthfulness are the same," says author and biblical scholar Marcus Borg. "The mainline Protestant tendency is to ask what we can pluck from the fire, and extract these rather banal ethical teachings."



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The result is a war of "proof-texts." Conservatives "prove" they're right by quoting one biblical passage, and liberals "prove" they're not by quoting another back at them. Take welfare. "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat," thunders the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:10. "Give to everyone who begs from you," says Jesus in Matthew 5:42.

And in a war of competing texts, religious conservatives will always be able to make the clearer, and louder, case. Seeking refuge from modern science and a contemporary moral view that allows for abortion, premarital sex, and homosexuality, they find in the Bible facts and rules that give them comfort. Religious liberals have a much more difficult time of it. Faced with an ancient text like the Bible, they feel stuck with either taking it literally and hating it, or wrestling some usefulness out of it by contextualization and extrapolation.

On the vexed subject of homosexuality, for example, conservatives have it easy: Every sentence on the subject in the Bible (all four or five of them) disapproves. On the

92 PERCENT of Americans have at least one Bible; most have three.

42 PERCENT of Americans think the Bible is the actual word of God.

gling—as we struggle—to understand what it means to be in a relationship. We're privileged to read over [the writers'] shoulders as they try to know what life with God is about. Sometimes they get it right, and sometimes they mess up badly, just as we do. But we have to take them seriously enough to grant them their own claims."

This radical notion—that the Bible not only isn't factual, it's not always right, either—may be frightening to many religious Christians, but it's what lets readers and participants join this ancient and ongoing conversation. We do not have to buy everything the Bible says. We just have to listen to it and to each other. "It's an extraordinarily difficult thing to actually hear someone else," Visotzky says. "Most of the time we're pretending to be listening when what we're really hearing is confirmation or denial of ourselves. But if we're really listening, there is no 'I,' or if there is an 'I,' there is a 'thou' too, and something alien is worth considering because it's alien. It takes courage, skill, and safety."

**S**UCH CONVERSATIONS ARE TAKING HOLD. At New York City's Church of St. Luke in the Fields, rector Roger Ferlo leads about 30 people, not all parishioners or even Christians, in a weekly Bible study. Over and over, he urges the participants to bracket their assumptions about what the text says and see it fresh.

"The writer has a strategy—an agenda that is often very shrewd and sometimes deceptive—that you're being invited to participate in," Ferlo says. "Being fooled is part of the contract and part of the pleasure. [Poet Samuel Taylor] Coleridge called it willful suspension of disbelief. But if people think the Bible is all about belief, they have a hard time with that. I'm asking them for a willing suspension, not of disbelief, but of belief. That's a hard thing in a religious setting."

The group is getting there. "The Bible is like an accordion now to me when I read it," says Marion Lane, a regular participant. "There's an opening up between the words on the page, leaving space for the Holy Ghost and also for human intellect. In my early education, the hand of God was supposed to be writing this down. Now I find there were other emotions, other needs involved, and there's room for me to have my own feelings and understand other people's feelings."

The group studied the Book of Job recently, prompted by writer and group member Janet Malcolm. Job is profound poetry framed by an ancient and primitive folktale about a good man whom God allows to be tormented to test his faith. Surrounded by friends who insist he must have done something to deserve his misery, Job proclaims his righteousness and demands an accounting from God. Then God speaks, a voice out of a whirlwind, in majestic poetry that seems, on the sur-

While many see a spiritual revival in the recent rise of Pentecostalism and faith healers, Hank Hanegraaff, Christian radio's wildly popular "Bible Answer Man" and author of *Counterfeit Revival*, sees nothing short of a hoax. According to Hanegraaff (who is a fundamentalist Christian), the only true path to God is—what else?—the Bible. The following is Hanegraaff's explanation, excerpted from an August radio interview conducted by Hugh Hewitt, guest host on the nationally syndicated "Michael Reagan Show."

That's not only dangerous from a spiritual standpoint, it's also dangerous from a physical standpoint, because the cervical spine is not set up for that kind of motion.

These manifestations are explainable by natural causes. Certainly they're harmful. They're characteristic of neurological diseases such as

barking like dogs, writhing on the floor, jerking spasmodically, laughing uncontrollably, and they think this has to be the Holy Ghost. Obviously it does not. This is experiential pandering.

If you go back to Franz Mesmer in the 18th century, he would simply point a finger in the direction of

one of his devotees, and instantly they would begin to jerk spasmodically. There was no illusion what-

## Faith Healing Hoax

THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT HAVE been commonplace in carnivals and communes are now center stage in the church. The principles of sociopsychological manipulation that have been used by stage hypnotists are now being used by pastors.

I was down in Pensacola, Florida, at an Assemblies of God church. One lady was waving her head back and forth wildly for two and a half hours while I was there; she's been doing it for one and a half years.

palsy. And they're found in the world of the occult. A cultist always dulls the critical thinking faculty, because the mind is seen to be the obstacle to enlightenment. Counterfeit revivalists say—and this is one of the mantras you hear over and over again—"God offends the mind to reveal the heart." In other words: "Don't think about this critically—accept it uncritically." But in Scripture we're told to be "alert and sober-minded." We're not supposed to be out of control.

When people have no barometer for truth whatsoever, anything can go. People are roaring like lions,

soever that this had anything to do with spirituality. Mesmer said he could heal people. Now a lot of evangelists in the counterfeit revival are saying the exact same thing. The truth of the matter is this: Mesmer could heal people of psychosomatic illnesses by psychosomatic cures. And so can today's evangelists and faith teachers. But they can't heal people of organic diseases. You have these guys—the very guys that are pandering this kind of stuff—walking around with bad toupees. If they really were into the genuine article, perhaps they'd heal their hair. □



face, utterly irrelevant. "Where were you," God demands of Job, "when I planned the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise.... Were you there...when I wrapped the ocean in clouds and swaddled the sea in shadows?"

Stephen Mitchell, the poet and scholar whose translation of Job the group used, makes note of the book's complexity. "You have Job and his friends, God and Job, and then God and the poet in another kind of conversation—and all of these are in play," he says. "If you approach the text as the 'truth,' you can't possibly get to a deeper place of intimacy with it. With only one pole, there's no place to go.

"Conversation," he adds, "is one of the deepest and subtlest ways of play and growth and intimacy, and it's a bipolar experience."

The group's conversation about the voice from the whirlwind was impassioned. God's refusal to provide answers infuriated some. To others, the passage revealed the God who can be encountered but never grasped.

"What if God appeared out of a whirlwind," asks group member John Merz, "and told us, 'You're all fighting over this book, and you think you're going to control me—but where were you when I did all these things?'"

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Malcolm, who says she is not a religious person, was amazed by the passage. "All those great verses about nature, about rain falling and nobody knowing about it, were very, very powerful," she says. "It told us: This is what happens, in nature and to people."

To read the Bible as a conversation is to read it as a question, not an answer, a

starting point, not a final declaration. It's not easy; it takes energy to suspend our own assumptions and welcome surprise.

But it also offers a way out of the dead end of sound-bite debate into genuine dialogue. "What makes the Bible come alive," says Ferlo, "is acceptance of the possibility of edges, and not a fear of them." To a political arena paralyzed by that fear, maybe the Bible actually does have something to say. □

Ann Monroe is a Mother Jones contributing writer. Her story on the Christian Coalition's effort to attract African Americans appeared in the May/June issue.

**67 PERCENT** of evangelical Christians think blacks who can't get ahead are more responsible for their own condition than is the impact of discrimination.