



The Bible: A Biography

Karen Armstrong

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Bible: A Biography

Karen Armstrong

The Bible: A Biography Karen Armstrong

As the work at the heart of Christianity, the Bible is the spiritual guide for one out of every three people in the world. It is also the world's most widely distributed book, translated into over two thousand languages, and the world's best selling book, year after year. But the Bible is a complex work with a complicated and obscure history. Made up of sixty-six "books" written by various authors and divided into two testaments, its contents have changed over the centuries. The Bible has been transformed by translation and, through interpretation, has developed manifold meanings to various religions, denominations, and sects. In this seminal account, acclaimed historian Karen Armstrong discusses the conception, gestation, and life of history's most powerful book. Armstrong analyzes the social and political situation in which oral history turned into written scripture, how this all-pervasive scripture was collected into one work, and how it became accepted as Christianity's sacred text. She explores how scripture came to be read for information, and how, in the nineteenth century, historical criticism of the Bible caused greater fear than Darwinism. This is a brilliant, captivating book, crucial in an age of declining faith and rising fundamentalism.

The Bible: A Biography Details

Date : Published October 1st 2007 by Atlantic Monthly Press (first published January 1st 2007)

ISBN : 9780871139696

Author : Karen Armstrong

Format : Hardcover 229 pages

Genre : Religion, History, Nonfiction, Theology, Christianity

 [Download The Bible: A Biography ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Bible: A Biography ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Bible: A Biography Karen Armstrong

From Reader Review The Bible: A Biography for online ebook

Beckie says

Karen Armstrong is among my top five religion scholars, and also probably my top five former nuns. She does a good job of making complicated history and theory comprehensible. At least one chapter of "The Bible: a Biography" pretty well summed up a semester-long class I had, and the book sweeps through history from ancient Israel through the present.

It's also worth noting that Armstrong traces the Jewish perspective on the Bible throughout that whole period, where many authors focus exclusively on Christian ideas once we hit the early church. This is to her credit, and the reader's benefit.

My main complaint is that the author's trademark simplification comes at a price. While Armstrong is very critical of much accepted wisdom about the Bible (particularly the idea of taking it literally) and of events as portrayed in the biblical texts, she takes some theories for granted. For example, the idea of the 'Q' text behind the synoptic gospels is presented as a fact. It's a well-respected theory, but how much stock can you put in a hypothetical text we don't have? There are also some historical stories she accepts at face value, and I cannot tell how she makes that call sometimes. This does the reader a disservice.

Toward the end, Armstrong tips her hand a bit, showing a clear desire to salvage the Bible (and other religious texts) from the damage inflicted by fundamentalists (in her view) and find value in it for modern readers. Which is fine and all, I personally do think opinions should be allowed in scholarship, but it's just not the purported purpose of this book.

It's still worth reading: a scholarly book for a general audience.

Ed says

I bought this on a whim in the bookstore at O'Hare and read much of it on the plane. I thought it was a very good summary of the history of the Bible, from origins in oral tradition to contemporary phenomena such as a literal reading. It was particularly good on outlining the differences in approach in Jewish and Christian traditions. As in her other books, Armstrong strikes a nice balance between critical analysis and broad understanding of the non-rational aspects of religious thought and tradition. It also did a good job of discussing the widely diverse ways in which the Bible has been interpreted over time, based on the issues and dynamics of the time.

Ned says

I found this illuminating, as I always do Armstrong's books, for its careful yet lively writing style. She makes history and scholarship come alive. Predominant themes are how the written word has been used as guide and history and since the enlightenment the book known as the bible has been subjected to the criticisms and a level of literalism for which it was not intended. Her writing style is superb and she has an experts level of understanding of ancient tomes and history and context. Three stars only because I've gathered these themes from reading her prior works, and there wasn't a tremendous amount of revelation for me. But a good primer and a great read for anyone interested in how the bible came to be and the influences that came to bear on its many renderings and interpretations. The final chapter on modernity is excellent and she gives a fine epilogue for how we might all find some peace, civility and charity in an ugly world of strife.

Lawrence says

This book is a 120 mph speed race through . . . what? I guess how people have approached the Bible over the past couple of thousand years? I think it is a shallow book and poorly put together. To me, it feels as if the author simply shuffled her index cards, lined them up, and copied them. I felt I was reading a text that has all of the interest of an online computer manual.

This is a book that talks about the Bible and how it's been interpreted, but actually does not give one "real life" example about how a particular school might have done it. There are, amazingly, hardly any quotes --- if there are any at all --- from the Book itself. The whole thing is a vast abstraction, somewhat like a study guide that might be used to cram for an exam.

The author makes some interesting remarks, but then just drops them. For example, it would be interesting to know why or how the monk became the exemplar when there was no further opportunity for martyrdom (page 115). Or to know more about why the Fall of Rome means the West has a deep sense of Original Sin that apparently no one else does (page 126).

Then, there are things like Anselm of Bec becoming Archbishop of Canterbury in 1189 when the previous line gives his dates as 1033-1109!!! (page 136) And Nicholas of "Lyre" as opposed to Nicholas of Lyra!!! (page 153)

John Martindale says

Karan Armstrong not only quickly did an overview of the development of bible from a highly skeptical secular perspective, but also touched on Christian and Jewish history. The most interesting part to me was the brief overview of Jewish and Christian interpretations of scriptures through history. As I listened, I did notice some straight up errors (if what I've learned elsewhere is to be believed), and the book seemed very biased. Again and again she would share what was in reality an extremely speculative interpretation, theory or hypothesis and present it as solid fact, I don't recall her ever using the words; "possibly", "It seems" or "some have argued" or "maybe it was", or even hinting that some of what she presented as fact is even seen as problematic by other liberal and anti-theistic scholars. What she shared was astronomically one sided, and the suppressed evidence was truly immense. If there was interpretation of the data that had tons of evidence for it, but then another interpretation that had very little or no evidence to support it, and yet put the bible and Christians in a worse light, the latter interpretation was of course the one presented as absolute undisputed fact.

I suppose that due to the brevity and scope of the book that there wasn't the time to give a more fair and balanced telling, yet still the extreme dogmatism could have been tempered somewhat, especially that which was based upon scholarship of convenience as Bart Ehrman calls it. Or as I like to call it Procrustean Scholarship, where they confidently date material so it fits their previously held schema, and claim the individual verses that still don't fit with their preconceived theories are interpolations, and then dream up motivations and read anything they want between the line, in order to force things line up a little too perfectly.

Riku Sayuj says

On Reading The Holy Texts: A Plea

The basic historical account of Armstrong's fits nicely with the Aslan take and also elaborates it for the reader, both into the pre-Christian past dealing with the consolidation of the old testament and the post-'christo' development of the holy texts.

In addition, this account gives a less detailed, and yet more comprehensive picture of this whole undertaking - it shows that Aslan might have tried to wind up his popular-history too fast and slacked on the details towards the end of his book, and attributed most of the blame to Paul in the reinterpretation. Armstrong shows how this too was a much more collaborative and extensive project and not a one-shot wonder or a singular turning point as Aslan dramatically portrays. In fact, most of modern christianity seems to have crystallized much later according to Armstrong's account.

One thing that stands out even more is that while Aslan focused, almost with zealous enthusiasm, on the fact that the early christians were reinterpreting the Jewish scriptures, he leaves out the fact that these Jewish scriptures were themselves the result of continuous reinterpretation across the centuries. The Christians were only carrying forward that tradition, as did the post-jerusalem jews, who developed it into the Torah culture. The continuing tension between those who wished to see a strict historical truth in the holy texts and those who sought some mystical meaning through allegory is the real story of the Bible, as of most religious texts. An exclusively literal interpretation of the Bible, as of other religious document is a recent, and quite anti-religious development, as most religious scholars of the past would attest.

Armstrong traces two parallel stories (one kickstarting only later, of course): the one of the Jews and the other of the Christians, swiveling around the two pivotal points of the destruction of the temple in the 6th century BCE and the even more devastating destruction of Herod's great temple in 70 CE. Both setting in motion the contrasting and inverted paths from meekness to militant apocalyptic worship and vice versa, told with fine dramatic flourish.

In the end the central message of Armstrong's book is that both these religions, especially Christianity, has evolved by continuous reinterpretation of the texts. This is what has allowed them to survive and adapt so much. Armstrong says that almost all religions of the world ask us to see the holy text with the light of compassion and then use them to guide our lives, and to be truly religious that is what we should do, not stick to artificial 'textual' readings of a text that was never there to begin with.

So unlike many scholarly attacks on Christianity and the historicity of the Bible, Armstrong does the same but from a deeply religious vantage point - one of saying that love your Bibles but also trust your holy texts enough to let them be your companions instead of your masters. The Bible, she says, was always interpreted in this spirit of '*allegoria*', one of mystical and spiritual interoperation, and Armstrong asks us to do the same instead of rejecting these holy texts or accepting them too literally. Only then we would be in the same path along with the greatest exegetes of the past like Philo, Jesus, etc.

In our dangerously polarized world, this spirit is even more important, especially when dealing with the 'holy' texts of other cultures. When you meet an alien culture and their holy texts, we should approach with the suspicion of truth, not of hostility. This is Armstrong's plea to us. The book is not particularly remarkable, being neither engrossing nor greatly educational, but the message is a valid one.

The Bible, and the other holy texts are today in danger of becoming either dead letters or toxic arsenals. There is an urgent need for a compassionate hermeneutics in our approach to religions, eschewing both extremes of outright rejection and blind compliance. The solution might be to recapture the spirit of the early religious scholars and mystics.

Thomas Strömquist says

DNF @ pg 170-something, which is way too late in this book where at least the last quarter is but references and glossary. It really started out interesting - or, maybe not interesting as much as bewildering.

This always happens to me when I try to read anything on the subject, I end up in a confused state over how so many have the ability to just turn off logic reasoning and just decide that "I'm going to believe this.". In this case, the discrepancy is of course the mutual exclusiveness of believing in god and believing what's in the collection of writings later known as "The Bible", through countless mutations due to translations, interpretations and will of men to be a true account of anything.

The beginning describes this nicely, we move through old stories and polytheistic religions evolving much through the writings through hundreds of years and later included in or discarded from what became the Bible. Somewhere in the middle, the author lost me though and when she tried to in some roundabout way act the apologetic from all that was in the first part and try to reason Jehova into existence again, I dropped this one. Twice, literally - first on account of rolling my eyes so hard I got dizzy and later when I fell asleep in my lounge chair.

I went in with no pre-knowledge, but after this turn of events, I did look the author up and Wikipedia tells that she was a nun, but converted to a more liberal and mythical christian faith. It is also stated that "Her work focuses on commonalities of the major religions, such as the importance of compassion and the Golden Rule." Hm, I do wonder how come different religions, from different parts of the world do have certain things, such as these, in common? The fact that they are directly related to human decency and common frickin sense surely must be a too simple solution? Perhaps not. One thing I'm really sure about - if I had read the Wiki article first, it would have saved me some time that I could have used reading something else...

Jonathan says

I really wanted to learn something from this book. But my problem is – how do I know what I've learned? Armstrong presents many controversial theories, but just states them as declared fact. Nowhere does she explain the evidence that led her to those theories or any alternative views. Primary sources are limited in several chapters and no academic research is cited. I'm not even aware whether she's done any of her own academic research, or whether she just repeating the popular material of the people she agrees with the most. Over and over she takes an issue for which we have limited facts and states her favorite theory about it as if it could be no other way. This is the kind of positivist view of history that was dismissed by serious historians decades ago, but still is fed to the general public by those who should know better.

I'm familiar with many of the theories because I've read them in other sources. Quite a few of them could be partially or entirely accurate. But if someone were to give me an alternative theory, how would I be able to judge it in comparison to Armstrong's? She doesn't give any examples of the facts, logic, or academic research her ideas are based on, and certainly doesn't express any humility or give consideration to alternative ideas. She just expects you to believe her. My recommendation would be – if you hear any alternative theories that contradict anything she says, and those theories provide the slightest bit of primary sources, interior logic, or academic research to back themselves up, then you'd have to prefer them over hers.

Jon Stout says

Like everything that Karen Armstrong touches, this work is exhaustive and erudite and wonderful. It does not summarize what is in the Bible, but rather is a broad scope history of how the Bible was written and how it has been interpreted unto the present day. The treatment supports Armstrong's general theme that world religions do not offer a body of beliefs to be factually evaluated, but rather a way of life, a spiritual discipline including rites and rituals, which can only be evaluated by being lived out.

The history of how the Tanakh (or "Old Testament") was written had some surprises for me. For example, I knew that in Genesis, scholars had discerned (at least) two distinct authors, the Yahwist and the Elohimist (based on the names "Yahway" and "Elohim" used for God). The Yahwist famously portrayed God in highly personal terms, as walking in the Garden of Eden with Adam, and as being a guest in the tents of Abraham, while the Elohimist portrayed God in more transcendent terms. What I didn't know was that these two "authors" probably comprised the respective literatures of the ancient Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The points of view were collated into one after the Assyrian defeat of Israel in 722 B.C.E., when the refugees fled to Judah.

Equal attention is given to early Christianity and to Pharisaical Judaism, the two largest competing branches of Judaism at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. Judaism and Christianity needed very different survival techniques, and took very different forms, in order to cope with the power of the Roman Empire.

The history continues with a discussion of how the Bible was interpreted by both Jewish and Christian traditions in the last two millennia. There is far too much information to summarize, but one consequence of the discussion is to show that the contemporary reflex, to evaluate the Bible as either factually true or factually false, leaves out a lot of possibilities for how the Bible has actually been regarded and used.

Talmudic scholars sometimes regarded the inspirational experience derived from interpretation as more important than the original meaning. Christian writers and interpreters of the New Testament often took the Tanakh to be referencing the yet-to-be-born Jesus. More commonly, scholars have regarded the Bible as the history of a faith community, whose general conclusions are relative to a particular time and place. And many commentators, both Jewish and Christian, have argued that an interpretation should be judged in terms of whether it increases compassion in the world.

Steve Herman says

Ms. Armstrong is a former nun who has become a popular writer on religion. Her faith-based "biography" of the Bible runs roughshod over the facts. There are far too many errors to discuss here, so I will focus on a few key points and her overall conclusion.

Like many others, Ms. Armstrong says that we should not read the Bible literally. This leads to too many problems. But Ms. Armstrong goes further and insists that Christians did not read the Bible literally: "It is ... crucial to note that an exclusively literal interpretation of the Bible is a recent development. Until the nineteenth century, very few people imagined that the first chapter of Genesis was a factual account of the origins of life." (p. 3); "the first chapter of Genesis was rarely read as a factual description of the origins of the cosmos." (p. 223); "after the Enlightenment, some saw the biblical narratives as purely factual, forgetting that they were written as stories" (p. 220).

This is utterly preposterous. For example, St Augustine wrote *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. As the title indicates, Augustine insisted on literal interpretations, and dismissed allegorical and other non-literal approaches. Historically, Christianity almost always insisted that the Bible was literally true. They claimed it was the literal word of God, and therefore must be taken literally. The Catholic Church created the Office of the Inquisition to enforce literal interpretations. That's why it arrested Galileo, and persecuted many others. That's why Copernicus was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. For centuries, the Index focused almost exclusively on books that contradicted a literal interpretation of the Bible. The Index was enforced by the Inquisition.

Nor was literal interpretation limited to the Catholic Church. Martin Luther insisted on it, as did John Calvin. Ms. Armstrong knows these facts, but chooses to rewrite history to fit her faith. And she does so repeatedly. To cite another fantastic example, Ms. Armstrong claims, "The Spanish Inquisition ... was a modernizing institution, designed to create ideological conformity" (p. 176)." That's like saying the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11 was urban renewal. Even Pope John Paul apologized for the Inquisition, tacitly admitting it was an atrocity.

Ms. Armstrong's conclusion and bottom-line: "We can read the Bible today as a prophetic commentary on our own world of raging orthodoxies; it can provide us with the compassionate distance to realize the dangers of this strident dogmatism and replace it with a chastened pluralism." These are the kind of feel-good bromides that have made her popular. But her claim about the Bible's pluralism is, once again, preposterous.

The Bible's very first commandment said the God of Israel is a jealous God, and prohibits followers from having anything to do with any other god. It is anything but pluralistic. After the Exodus, when God delivers his people to their land of milk and honey, the first thing he has them do is slaughter all the tribes living there. They worshiped other gods, and according to the Bible, God would not tolerate pluralism. Whenever the children of Israel show signs of pluralism, God punishes them. Whenever anything goes wrong, pluralism is blamed for it. This is the constant refrain of the prophets.

Intolerance is not limited to the Old Testament. The New Testament's gospels say there is no salvation outside of Jesus. There is no trace of pluralism in the Book of Revelation, which prophesies that non-believers will die a gruesome death and then suffer the eternal flames of Hell. You need a vivid imagination to find evidence of pluralism.

Before Constantine empowered Christianity, there were many different Christian sects. Constantine established the Nicene Creed. Any deviation from it was heresy. The Church persecuted heretics. It destroyed most Christian gospels and other texts as heresy. Soon the Christian state declared pagan worship to be a capital crime. Christianity totally rejected pluralism, using the Bible as justification.

Centuries later, when some Christians protested the corruption of the Catholic Church and its dubious interpretations of the Bible, the Church declared another Holy War. Catholics and Protestants spilled a sea of blood. Ms. Armstrong's biography willfully ignores this. Neither Catholics nor Protestants found "chastened pluralism" in the Bible.

Based on the biblical commandment to kill witches and sorcerers, Catholics and Protestants alike conducted witch hunts, killing thousands of innocent women.

The bloodiest and most exploitative forms of imperialism were conducted by Christian institutions, once again using the Bible as justification. The White Man's Burden was accompanied by Onward Christian Soldiers. Christian imperialists practiced murder, subjugation, and forced conversion -- not pluralism. These chapters are also missing from Ms. Armstrong's biography.

Thomas says

It is astonishing how much history Armstrong packs into a small space. While I am sure she knows her stuff, the brevity of coverage makes it impossible to independently evaluate her statements. For example, was Augustine's theory of original sin really inspired by the sacking of Rome? My other complaint is more a weakness of my own mind than of Armstrong's writing. I believe that approximately two weeks from now, I will not be able to remember the difference between the theology of Abelard and that of Philo. (Despite the fact that only one of them is a Jew.) And since the oldest ecclesiastical authors go by names like "P" and "E", I can barely keep track of the Old Testament authors, even as I read about them.

Very well narrated, if you like it bland.

Leslie says

This book, a biography of the Bible, is very informative and it covers from the beginning of the Old Testament to the present time. I've never read a book before that talks about how the Old Testament canon was chosen, so that was very interesting. Armstrong shows the different schools of thought that existed back in ancient Israel. I was surprised how little time she spent on how the New Testament canon was chosen. Instead Armstrong concentrated on the many different ways of approaching scripture, studying the bible, viewing God, when people did or didn't take things literally. She concentrates on exegesis and all the many ways it is done. I also like that she continues comparing and contrasting the two religions all the way through time. Most books about the bible don't mention Judaism after they start talking about Christianity, like it just shriveled up and died or something. Which it did not! Armstrong keeps both threads running concurrently and shows how similar cultural shifts and historical events affected both religion's approach to the bible and God. She explains many terms I didn't know the meaning of and elaborates on many I was fuzzy on. As always, Armstrong's writing style is concise, complex, and yet comprehensible in the extreme. I think Karen Armstrong is one of the best writers about religion around.
