

discussion questions

Better Ways to Read the Bible by Zach W. Lambert

Introduction: How the Bible Beat Me Up

1. Have you ever felt shut down for asking tough questions about faith? What happened when you raised doubts in your church community? How do you think churches could create space for wrestling with difficult questions, and what damage occurs when they don't?
2. Think about times when you've seen a Bible verse used as a weapon to harm rather than as a tool to heal. Maybe someone quoted Scripture to shut down a conversation, pass judgment, or condemn someone. What do you think drives people to use Scripture in harmful ways?
3. Of the four harmful lenses—literalism, apocalypse, moralism, and hierarchy—which one have you encountered most? How have you seen these perspectives create problems in how people understand and apply Scripture?
4. Have you noticed hidden assumptions in your own approach to reading Scripture? Or in others? What might change if we became more aware of these underlying frameworks?
5. “If our way of interpreting the Bible hurts people, then it must be reconsidered” (p. 9). Does that statement resonate with you or challenge you? What guideposts do you use to determine whether a particular reading of Scripture brings healing or harm?

Chapter 1: You're Reading It Wrong

1. Have you, like the author, also experienced a “complicated relationship with the Bible” (p. 13)? Have you ever felt confused or frustrated when reading Scripture? How did you reconcile those feelings?
2. Lambert discusses the importance of considering genre and context when reading the Bible. How do you make sense of the vast cultural differences between the worlds of the biblical authors and our world today? Can you share an example of when an understanding of the historical context changed how you viewed a particular passage?
3. Think about Yasmeen's, Roberto's, and Maria's stories, people who stopped reading Scripture after it hurt them or their loved ones (pp. 14–15). Have you seen similar spiritual wounds in your community? What responsibility do you feel when you see sacred texts being misused? How have you or your community tried to create opportunities for healing?
4. “We do not have a well-behaved Bible” (p. 16). What does this assertion mean to you? Has recognizing the Bible as a complex library of different voices and genres changed your relationship with it? Has this made your faith journey easier or more challenging?
5. Which voices do you think are being silenced in your community's conversations about Scripture? How are you seeking to consider new perspectives?

Chapter 2: Some Lenses Are Better Than Others

1. Have you ever caught yourself interpreting a passage based on your background, experiences, or cultural assumptions? What specific lenses do you think color how you understand religious texts?
2. “Pure exegesis is impossible” (p. 36). Does that ring true to your experience? Have you ever believed you were being completely objective about Scripture only to realize that your interpretation was being shaped by your social location, worldview, or circumstances?
3. What books have shaped your religious education? Whose sermons have influenced you? Are those voices homogeneous or diverse? How do you think your understanding might change if you deliberately sought diverse viewpoints?
4. Lisa Sharon Harper writes, “If one’s gospel falls mute when facing people who need good news the most . . . then it’s no good news at all” (p. 33). Do you agree? How can we ensure that our understanding of the gospel speaks to both “life after death” and “life before death”?
5. Which characters do you naturally identify with in Bible stories? The heroes? The victims? The bystanders? The oppressors? What might we learn by intentionally reading from the perspective of characters we usually overlook?

Chapter 3: The Literalism Lens

1. Have you personally experienced harm caused by the literal readings of certain passages? How has the lens of biblical literalism impacted you?
2. How has your religious upbringing (or lack thereof) colored the way you approach Scripture? What baggage or gifts do you carry from your own spiritual formation?
3. When considering God’s actions to clothe Adam and Eve rather than destroy them, does your understanding of God’s character shift? Has your understanding of the fall evolved over time? What details stand out that you missed before?
4. If Genesis isn’t primarily answering scientific or historical questions, what is its purpose? How might letting go of those modern—or literal—questions open up more meaningful insights for your spiritual journey?
5. Diego’s story (pp. 58–60) shows how literalistic readings often create barriers to faith. Have you or has someone close to you struggled with similar roadblocks? What helped you move past them, or are you still wrestling? What could your faith community do differently to walk alongside people facing these questions?

Chapter 4: The Apocalypse Lens

1. What was your first encounter with Left Behind theology and apocalyptic teaching? How has your relationship with Revelation evolved over your spiritual journey, and which teachers or experiences most shaped your understanding?
2. How does viewing Revelation as resistance literature written by oppressed Christians change your reading? Have these passages ever brought you comfort during difficult times in your life?
3. If you've experienced fear-based teaching about the end times, how did it affect your spiritual development and mental health? What lasting impact did that approach have on your relationship with God?
4. How might seeing Revelation as ultimately about restoration rather than destruction reshape your everyday choices regarding environmental care, community engagement, and relationships with those different from you?
5. Have you witnessed Scripture being weaponized against certain groups in ways that felt contrary to Christ's spirit? How do you personally maintain strong convictions while keeping an open heart toward those who differ from you?

Chapter 5: The Moralism Lens

1. Have you witnessed someone in your circle trapped in a difficult situation because of how Scripture was applied? When have you seen religious teachings protect or endanger someone in your community?
2. When has the moralism lens affected your own spiritual journey? Has there been a time when you felt crushed by religious rules rather than freed by grace? How did that shape your relationship with God?
3. Think about Jesus writing in the dirt beside the woman caught in adultery. What strikes you about his physical posture in that moment? When have you experienced or witnessed someone standing in solidarity with those who are suffering?
4. Jesus says "Go and sin no more" (John 8:11) only after extending acceptance of the woman caught in adultery. How does this sequence challenge the religious messages you've received? Have you ever experienced acceptance first, then transformation? Do you think transformation can occur without acceptance?
5. Jesus welcomed outcasts not to make them acceptable to God but to show that they were already accepted. How might this perspective have changed your own faith journey if you had heard it earlier? How could it reshape your community's approach to those who feel judged or excluded?

Chapter 6: The Hierarchy Lens

1. In your own spiritual journey, have you ever encountered leaders or teachings that seemed more focused on maintaining humanity's pecking order than fostering genuine connection and equality? How did this affect your faith?
2. In Acts 6, the early church addresses the marginalization of Hellenistic widows by appointing Hellenistic leaders (pp. 104-7). What can modern faith communities learn from this approach to resolving issues of representation and power? What do you think is preventing this type of representation and equality?
3. How do you respond to the idea that liberation theology is the antidote to hierarchical interpretations of Scripture? How might centering marginalized perspectives change our understanding of religious texts and traditions?
4. Where do you see religious communities struggling to embrace messages of liberation and equality in our current time?
5. Have you ever caught yourself or your community being selective in the interpretation of Scripture, championing liberation in some areas while staying silent on others? What helped you recognize this?

Chapter 7: The Jesus Lens

1. "Christianity is not a text-centered faith. Christianity is a Jesus-centered faith" (p. 114). What do you think this means? How might viewing Christianity through this lens change how believers approach Scripture?
2. In thinking about the shift from asking "Is this biblical?" to "Is this Christlike?," how might this approach change conversations about controversial topics within Christian communities?
3. Have you or has someone you know experienced a form of deconstruction? Did a specific experience initiate this process?
4. "The opposite of faith isn't doubt. . . . The opposite of faith is certainty" (p. 125). How does this perspective challenge traditional views of faith? Do you find this helpful or problematic?
5. Do you think it's true that people are leaving the church not because they reject Christian teachings but because the church itself doesn't seem to live by those teachings? Have you seen evidence of this in your life?

Chapter 8: The Context Lens

1. We all carry cultural lenses that color how we read Scripture. What cultural assumptions do you think might be influencing your church's (or your own) approach to the Bible? How do you determine if what you are reading is a timeless truth or the result of cultural conditioning?
2. Stories of women leaders like Deborah, Huldah, and Priscilla pepper the Bible, yet they often get overlooked. Which of these biblical women's stories speaks most powerfully to you, and how has it challenged what you previously believed about gender and leadership in the church?
3. Can you identify specific cultural norms today that might be influencing our interpretation of Scripture regarding gender roles?
4. Personal experience often acts as a catalyst for theological growth. Can you share a moment when real-life experience made you rethink your understanding of equality in the church? What changed about your perspective?
5. How might churches practically move toward more equitable leadership structures while remaining respectful of different theological traditions? What steps could be taken to create spaces where "people of any gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, background, and ability can experience freedom" (p. 147)?

Chapter 9: The Flourishing Lens

1. Imagine seeing the widow's mite story not as a tale of sacrificial giving but as Jesus's lament over systemic exploitation. What shifts in your own faith when you view Scripture through this lens of flourishing? Which other biblical stories might reveal new meanings when seen through fresh eyes?
2. "If the version of Christianity we are proclaiming does not prioritize liberation for the marginalized, then it is not the Christianity of Jesus Christ" (p. 153). Do you agree or disagree? How does this concept align with or challenge your understanding of God's relationship with different groups of people?
3. How does the story of Samantha's grandparents illustrate the potential harm of certain biblical interpretations (p. 149)? Can you think of other examples where religious teachings have led to harmful outcomes, either in your own life or someone else's?
4. "Our world is broken in a way that pits God's image bearers against one another and rewards oppression for the purpose of domination" (p. 154). Where do you see evidence of this today? What might liberation look like in these contexts? How might you participate in bringing it about?
5. How does this discussion on justice and the flourishing lens help you understand contemporary debates about justice within faith communities? How do you see justice playing itself out within your church or religious context?

Chapter 10: The Fruitfulness Lens

1. How have you witnessed or experienced conflicts in religious communities regarding LGBTQ+ individuals? What impact did these situations have on the individuals involved and the community as a whole?
2. If LGBTQ+ folks are producing good fruit, does that challenge traditional interpretations of biblical passages about sexuality and gender? Do you find this perspective compelling? Why or why not?
3. This chapter examines stories of sexual and gender minorities in Scripture, particularly the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. How might these stories shape our understanding of inclusion in religious communities? What other biblical stories come to mind that address issues of inclusion and exclusion?
4. Are there healthy ways to hold both traditional faith and full LGBTQ+ inclusion? What does “traditional faith” mean? Consider a time when you or someone you know navigated this tension. What was the outcome?
5. Behind the statistics of LGBTQ+ youth who have experienced rejection lie real human stories. What moves in your heart when you hear these numbers (see pp. 170–72)? How might your faith community become a place of genuine refuge rather than another source of harm?

Conclusion

1. Have you ever faced a situation where religious interpretation seemed to conflict with loving your neighbor? How did you resolve it?
2. Can you share an example of when you've seen Scripture used for liberation rather than oppression?
3. Which of the four healthy lenses (Jesus lens, context lens, flourishing lens, fruitfulness lens) do you find most valuable in your own reading of Scripture? Why?
4. How has reading Scripture in community shaped your understanding of the text differently than reading it alone?
5. The book closes with the hope of positive transformation through better ways of reading the Bible. Do you share this hope for yourself and/or your loved ones? In what ways has this book been challenging or difficult? In what ways has this book been helpful?