Marcus J. Borg

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time

Study Guide

Prepared by Gregory C. Jenks

FaithFutures Study Guides, 3
Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 7
- Marcus J. Borg
- Overview of Reading the Bible Again for the First Time
- How to Use this Study Guide

Session One: Getting Started .......................................................................................... 15
- People of the Book

Session Two: Foundations ............................................................................................... 31
- Chapter 1: Seeing the Bible Again

Session Three: Foundations ............................................................................................. 35
- Chapter 2: The Bible and God
- Chapter 3: History and Metaphor

Session Five: The Hebrew Bible ..................................................................................... 43
- Chapter 4: Reading the Creation Stories Again

Session Six: The Hebrew Bible ....................................................................................... 47
- Chapter 5: Reading the Pentateuch Again
- Chapter 6: Reading the Prophets Again

Session Seven: The Hebrew Bible .................................................................................. 51
- Chapter 7: Reading Israel’s Wisdom Again

Session Eight: The Hebrew Bible ................................................................................... 55
- Chapter 8: Reading the Gospels Again

Session Nine: Jewish Writings from the Second Temple Period .................................... 59
- Reading the Apocrypha Again

Session Ten: The New Testament .................................................................................. 73
- Chapter 9: Reading Paul Again

Sessions Eleven: The New Testament ............................................................................. 77
- Chapter 10: Reading Revelation Again

Additional Resources ........................................................................................................ 85
- Books by Marcus Borg
- Supplementary Materials
- Register as a FaithFutures Circle
FaithFutures Foundation

FaithFutures Foundation is an international interfaith organization that supports individuals and local faith communities as they seek to reshape their religious traditions in the light of advances in the arts, humanities, science and technology.

In pursuit of that objective, the Foundation has identified its principal activities as—

• **community development** … identify, encourage and support grassroots organizations with a concern to integrate the practice of religion with insights from scholarship in diverse fields

• **research support** … raise and distribute funds to support research and publication in religion as well as the adoption and application of historical and scientific scholarship by religious communities

• **events** … sponsorship of events designed to advance the integration of religion and scholarship and especially to make such scholarship more accessible to non-specialists

• **publications** … material relating to the processes and findings of religion scholars, as well as the application of their work to both traditional and experimental religious communities

The Foundation is registered as a nonprofit organization in Kansas.

For further information about the Foundation, including membership and financial support, please visit the FFF website:

[www.faithfutures.org](http://www.faithfutures.org)

About the Author

Gregory Jenks is Executive Trustee of FaithFutures Foundation.

Greg combines ministry as an Anglican priest with an interest in religion scholarship and adult faith education. He has taught in colleges and universities in Australia, the Middle East and North America. Formerly Associate Director of the Westar Institute in California, he is currently an Honorary Research Advisor in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland. His publications include *The Origins & Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (deGruyter, 1991). He is available for conferences and workshops, and may be contacted at:

FaithFutures Foundation
P.O. Box 822,
Kenmore, Qld 4069
Australia

office@faithfutures.org
SAMPLE
Introduction

This is a study guide to Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001). It has been prepared to assist people wanting to read through the book, and explore the issues it raises, in the company of other interested people.

- Most people using this guide will be participants in small discussion groups, sometimes under the auspices of a local church and sometimes autonomous groups that may draw people from a variety of religious affiliations.
- Others will use the guide as a resource for their own private reading of the book.

**Online Resources**

Whether you are part of a discussion group or reading independently, you are invited to participate in FFForum. This Internet meeting is sponsored by the FaithFutures Foundation to provide an online venue for discussion of the important religious questions addressed in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* as well as other books by Marcus Borg and a range of contemporary religious authors.

Participation in that forum is an optional element of this guide, and you are welcome to access it as often or as infrequently as you wish.

- To subscribe to the online discussion, simply send a blank email to: FFForum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com
- You will find specific information about the FFForum at: http://www.faithfutures.org/ffforum.html
- For additional information about the FaithFutures Foundation visit: http://www.faithfutures.org
- Resources specifically related to this guide will be published at: http://www.faithfutures.org/rbaft.html
Marcus J. Borg

Marcus Borg is the Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University. As one of the leading historical Jesus scholars of this generation, he is the author of numerous books, two of which have become best-sellers, Jesus: A New Vision (1987) and Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time (1994)

Other acclaimed titles include The God We Never Knew (named by Publishers Weekly as one of the ten best books in religion in 1997) and The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions, jointly written with N.T. Wright (named “Best General Interest Book of 1999” by the American Association of Theological Booksellers.

Professor Borg has lectured widely in the USA (including at the Smithsonian and Chautauqua Institutions) as well as in England, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Hungary, Israel, and South Africa. His books have been translated into German, Dutch, Korean, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and French.

A long-time Fellow of the Jesus Seminar, he has also been national chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature and co-chair of its International New Testament Program Committee.

He is currently president of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars and a regular columnist for “Belief.net.”

Marcus Borg also serves on the Panel of Advisers for FaithFutures Foundation.

In his writings, Marcus Borg has revealed something of his personal religious journey. Raised in a devout Lutheran family in North Dakota, Borg grew up with an easy-going acceptance of the Bible and core Christian beliefs. In Reading the Bible Again for the First Time Borg alludes to this upbringing:

My family and congregation were not fundamentalists. Rather, we were natural literalists, though we favored what we might call “soft literalism.” We did not, for example, insist upon reading the Genesis stories of creation literally. It was fine to see the six days of creation as geological epochs. We did not have to deny the existence of dinosaurs or the fossil record. But as “soft literalists,” we took it for granted that the most important events in the Bible happened pretty much as they are reported. That at the time of the exodus the sea really did part to allow the ancient Hebrews to pass through. That Jesus really was born of a virgin, really did walk on the water, really did multiply the loaves, and so forth. (p. 10f)

STUDY GUIDE: Reading the Bible Again for the First Time
In a biographical essay first published in *The Fourth R*, Marcus describes the central place that Church had in his life as a child:

Church was important. “Our Savior’s Lutheran Church” was the center of my family’s life: Sunday services and Sunday School, Ladies’ Aid meetings with my mom, frequent church suppers, mid-week services during Lent, missionary conferences, and youth groups with names like “Lutheran Children of the Reformation.” Several of my uncles were Lutheran pastors, and friends and relatives often asked me as a little boy if I planned to be one, too.1

After moving into a typical period of doubt and questioning as an adolescent, Borg found his intellect was excited by a “brilliant young professor with a fresh Ph.D. from the University of Chicago” when taking the required religion course at Concordia College, Morehead, Minnesota. Despite planning to proceed to law school, Borg found himself enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York, courtesy of a Rockefeller Brothers Theological Scholarship.

Once again the impact of a good teacher was felt; this time the Welsh NT scholar, W.D. Davies. During his graduate studies Borg was able to spend a year at Oxford, working closely with Professor George Caird, who would later supervise his doctoral research.

Moving to a secular institution after ten years teaching at Concordia College was to bring Borg the opportunity to pursue his interest in Jesus within a cross-cultural perspective, and the challenge of talking meaningfully about Jesus in a non-Christian setting. After a number of experiences that he came to recognize as “nature mysticism,” Borg found his way back to Christianity but with a radically different understanding of faith. He concludes his autobiographical essay with these words—

> When I was a child, I thought that being a Christian was about “believing,” and belief was no problem. When I was an adolescent and young adult, I struggled with trying to believe, and finally was no longer able to do so. Now I see that it is not a question of belief, and there is much that I do not believe. I do not believe that Christianity is the only way of salvation, or that the Bible is the revealed will of God, or that Jesus was the unique Son of God. Rather, I now see that the Christian tradition—including its claims about Jesus—is not something to be believed, but something to be lived in. I see the Bible and the tradition as “icons,” mediators of the sacred. The point is not to believe them, but to be in relationship to that which they mediate: God, the Spirit, the sacred. My own journey has thus been “beyond belief.” It has moved from belief through doubt and disbelief to relationship. For me, to be a Christian is to be part of a community that tells these stories and sings these songs. It feels like home.

The journey has made him an effective communicator and teacher, and he is in great demand for conferences and workshops.

---

Overview of Reading the Bible Again for the First Time

The material in Reading the Bible Again for the First Time provides an introduction to the broad mainstream of biblical scholarship, as well as suggesting ways in which the Bible can continue to be appreciated and used for its religious value.

One of the book’s special qualities is this combination of world-class critical scholarship with a genuine personal religious outlook. Another is simply the effective communication style that Marcus has developed as a teacher and as an author.

The overall structure of Reading the Bible Again for the First Time is quite straightforward. The book is divided into three sections:

Part One: Foundations
Part Two: The Hebrew Bible
Part Three: The New Testament

Since brief outlines of each chapter have been included in the notes for individual sessions, it will not be necessary to repeat that information here.

As we have already seen, there is no sense in which Marcus Borg can be called a conservative or a literalist. He looks at Christian faith—and Jesus in particular—through a very different lens than those of the fundamentalists. Indeed, from their point of view, Borg is more dangerous than an outrageous skeptic precisely because he is so adept at re-visioning the faith, in a way that takes seriously both critical scholarship and religious experience.

In the brief preface to Reading the Bible Again for the First Time, Marcus is quite clear about his own viewpoint as author:

I describe myself as a nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic Christian, committed to living my life with God within the Christian tradition, even as I affirm the validity of all the enduring religious traditions. (p. x)

In reading through Borg’s treatment of the Bible, you will see repeatedly how his appreciation of these sacred writings is informed by his openness to cross-cultural perspectives on religion and his own mystical experiences. That may be an aspect of his discussion that you find very positive, but equally some readers will most likely find it troubling. In any case, it is something to which you may wish to attend as you work through this guide.

For his part, Borg is clear about his purpose in writing—

One of my central purposes in this book is to address the present conflict about the Bible within the church and to provide Christians with a persuasive way of seeing and reading their sacred scriptures, a way that takes the Bible seriously without taking it literally. (p. xi)

It will be your call, at the end of this study program, to assess whether or not he has achieved his purpose so far as you are concerned.
Using this Study Guide

Wrestling with serious works that engage the radical questions facing faith at this point in its history, is one of the significant ingredients for religious literacy. Such materials will draw on the insights emerging from scholarship and seek to integrate them with traditional knowledge and practice.

This guide has been prepared on the assumption that many people are able to handle such works, and indeed want to do so. They do not need, nor do they wish, to be protected from unfamiliar or challenging material. Instead, they appreciate the opportunity to explore, in the supportive environment of a discussion group, the religious tradition that we share and its implications for daily life in our kind of world.

For this program, discussion of the material in Reading the Bible Again for the First Time has been allocated over 12 sessions as follows—

Session One: Getting Started
- People of the Book

Session Two: Foundations
- Chapter 1: Seeing the Bible Again

Session Three: Foundations
- Chapter 2: The Bible and God

Session Four: Foundations
- Chapter 3: History and Metaphor

Session Five: The Hebrew Bible
- Chapter 4: Reading the Creation Stories Again

Session Six: The Hebrew Bible
- Chapter 5: Reading the Pentateuch Again

Session Seven: The Hebrew Bible
- Chapter 6: Reading the Prophets Again

Session Eight: The Hebrew Bible
- Chapter 7: Reading Israel’s Wisdom Again

Session Nine: Jewish Writings from the Second Temple Period
- Reading the Apocrypha Again

Session Ten: The New Testament
- Chapter 8: Reading the Gospels Again

Session Eleven: The New Testament
- Chapter 9: Reading Paul Again

Session Twelve: The New Testament
- Chapter 10: Reading Revelation Again
In the table of contents, the sessions have been grouped into six sets of pairs to assist those groups wishing to work through *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* in six sessions rather than twelve.

That will require selections to be made from the suggested reflection exercises and other resources in the *Leader’s Notes*. In addition, it will usually be necessary to allow additional time for discussion of issues arising from the reading as the group members will have read twice as much material between sessions.

As an alternative, some groups may wish to break the study program into two sets of six sessions, rather than run for 12 consecutive sessions. In that case, it will be easy to take sessions one to six in the first series (general issues about the Bible, plus Creation and Pentateuch), and to leave the remaining sessions for the second series.

No matter what options your group has chosen, you may find it helpful to read the entire book right through, and then to re-read the sections selected for discussion each week.

Along the way, additional topics may be identified for discussion. In some cases it will be possible to allocate the extra time needed within the cycle of the discussion group, but in some cases it may be better to plan for them to be addressed in a subsequent series.

The study guide will provide a brief introduction to the selected chapters from *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, as well as highlighting some issues for reflection and discussion.

The material in Borg’s book has been supplemented in two ways.

- For most sessions you will find that there are suggestions for biblical passages to be read as representative samples of the issues discussed in the designated chapter from *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*.

- In addition, two additional essays have been included in this study guide. The first essay (“Campfire to Computer”) is suggested as reading prior to the first session, and is intended to set the scene for some of the material that will be dealt with as the program unfolds. The other essay (“Reading the Apocrypha Again”) is set for session nine, and is intended to cover the Apocrypha/Deutero-Canonical Writings that form part of the Bible for the majority of Christians but are not treated in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*.

A notebook that can serve as a journal or logbook to record your insights, questions and reflections throughout the discussion is highly recommended. Such a record not only helps with the process of reading and reflecting at the time, but also provides a way of reviewing the issues at a later stage.
In some cases additional material will be provided in the study guide, but mostly they will be made available from the FaithFutures Foundation website. This allows us to enrich the resources around this guide in the light of feedback from users and the development of new materials. It also means that the master copy can be used in more than one situation with ready access to updated resources at no additional charge.

As supplementary resources become available they will be published through the FFF site. These are expected to include—

- further material relevant to *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*
- additional ideas for discussion group leaders
- resources for liturgical settings
- information on audiotapes and videos
- contact details for related organizations

For convenient access to resources that are directly related to this study guide, simply visit the following site: http://www.faithfutures.org/rbaft.html

As individuals, local networks and even some local faith communities seek to engage with the issues raised in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, there is a wealth of wisdom that is being acquired and tested.

FaithFutures Foundation is intended as a network where these resources can be shared with other interested people, and where such creativity can be affirmed and encouraged. We invite you to provide your own educational materials, sermons, worship resources, etc for possible publication on the FFF site. For additional information on what is involved, please visit http://www.faithfutures.org/guidelines.html

This study guide is intended as a tool to assist you in seeing the Christian Bible from a fresh perspective. As you read and discuss Borg’s book, and as you share your own insights and experiences as people of faith, my hope is that you will find new ways that the Bible can be taken seriously but not literally. If this brief guide helps you do that it will have served its purpose.

Gregory C. Jenks
Brisbane, Australia
August 2002
See *Additional Resources* at the back of this study guide for a full listing of books by Marcus Borg as well as details of other information about him.

Visit [http://www.faithfutures.org/calendar.html](http://www.faithfutures.org/calendar.html) for details of Marcus Borg’s public itinerary.
Session One
Getting Started: People of the Book

Reading Assignment—

“Campfire to Computer: The Bible across the years.” (pages 17–30 below)

For this session there is no required text from *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. However, you are encouraged to read the essay “Campfire to Computer” as you prepare for the initial group session.

That essay was originally written as a text for an adult education unit, *Biblical Foundations for Ministry*, offered through St Francis’ Theological College in Brisbane, Australia. It has been revised for this study guide and you may find that it provides some helpful background as you read Marcus Borg’s book and then discuss some of the issues that he raises.

After reading this essay you should be familiar with:

- variations in the canonical forms of the Bible: Hebrew, Samaritan and Septuagint (in the past) and Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox and Protestant (in the present);
- the rarity of our situation with access to so many versions and editions of the Bible, including digital editions with powerful search functions;
- the history of writing and the impact of developments such as the alphabet for the origins of the Bible;
- the period between Josiah and Nehemiah as the critical time during which the ‘idea of the Bible’ seems to have emerged; and,
- the major groups of writings found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

In the opening session there may be some opportunity to discuss any insights or questions triggered by the essay. However, the main focus of this session is to begin meeting as an adult study community to explore together the significance of the Bible for Christian faith and practice.
During the following sessions you will be invited to explore, challenge and test the role that the Bible plays in contemporary Christian life. This will involve not so much a look backwards to the origins, composition, canonization and transmission of the Bible (interesting though such topics may be to some people), as an appreciation of what the Bible can mean here and now. The sub-title of the book is worth keeping in mind: taking the Bible seriously but not literally.

BYO Bible!

Given the focus of this study program, you will want to bring a Bible to each session but that is especially so for this opening session.

- You may well have a favorite personal copy. This may not necessarily be the one that you find most useful for regular use, although that would also suggest an interesting issue for reflection. Why do we find some versions and editions of the Bible better than others? Can a copy of the Bible be valued for reasons other than its contents? In any case, if you have a copy of the Bible that has some special significance to you, please bring it along to this first session.

- In addition, please bring your preferred working copy of the Bible. This may be a ‘study Bible’ with extensive annotations, maps, etc; or simply the one you use most often because you like the feel of its pages. Again, please bring it to this session and all subsequent sessions.

- You may also have a Bible program on your computer, or perhaps an eBook edition that works on your handheld device. If so it may be worth bringing your laptop or handheld device to at least this session, so that the group gets a better sense of the great diversity in ways that members use their Bibles.

In addition to discussing each other’s preferences in Bibles, you may also have an opportunity to share ideas on study aids and other resources that you have found helpful.