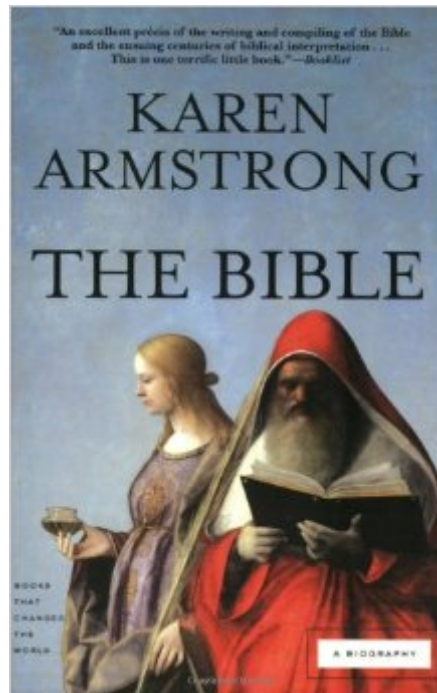


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The Bible: A Biography (Books That Changed The World)



Synopsis

As the single work at the heart of Christianity, the world's largest organized religion, 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 and its best-selling, with an estimated six billion copies sold in the last two hundred years. But the Bible is a complex work with a complicated and obscure history. Its contents have changed over the centuries, it 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, life, and afterlife 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, and how its interpretation changed over time. Armstrong's history of the Bible is a brilliant, captivating book, crucial in an age of declining faith and rising fundamentalism.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Karen Armstrong's book is (despite a poorly selected cover on the American edition) the most straight-forward, lucid explanation of how the Bible originated that I've seen. In only 230 pages the reader is taken on a tour of the current scholarly consensus about what we now know about the Bible's beginnings and development, not what the Sunday morning popularizers would like us to think. This book is written for non-specialists (something the previous reviewer doesn't seem to

appreciate), which means you get a general account without footnotes, and that makes it highly readable. If you recoil from the literalism of the proof-texting preachers, here is a measure of both liberation and exhilaration. Even the short introduction is a tour de force of common sense all by itself. Brilliant!

I'd rename this book "Karen Armstrong Calls a Code on The Bible", as in calling a code in the hospital when someone has had a cardiac and/or respiratory arrest. By the end of Armstrong's book, the cardiac monitor hooked to the Christian Bible has a strong and steady beat. I once took the time to read the Bible from cover to cover. Weary of being battered by Campus Crusaders (an oddly apt name), I went to the source (in English, I don't read Greek or Hebrew), and read every word, including the begats, including the many, many proscriptions for capital punishment, including the incredibly bloody and genocidal behavior of those who were supposed to be God's Chosen People, including funky dietary directions. My conclusion was that taking the Bible as the literal word of God can only be done by descending to a level of intellectual and emotional dishonesty that I could not personally access. If the Bible WAS the literal Logos (word of God), then, to paraphrase Ricky Ricardo talking to Lucy: God, you have some serious 'splainin' to do. What then to do with this amazing collection of texts that has been somewhat haphazardly and arbitrarily lumped together and called The Bible? Answer: read Armstrong's remarkable, pithy, eye and mind opening book. The rich tradition of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) springs into a Joseph's Multi-Colored Coat dazzler: Violence, religious ecstasy, profound desire for knowledge of God, sex, political manipulation, ego, faith, hope, love, and raw lust for power swirl through this kaleidoscopic, richly layered, many textured book called The Bible. By tracing the Abrahamic roots of biblical religions, tracking the gradual coalescence of religious writings that would eventually become the Bible, and giving a thorough AND thrilling history of the way Western faithful have reacted to Sacred Scripture, Armstrong made me, and might make you, want to again pick up a book that seems more often used for hitting people over their theological or political heads than inspiring compassion and cohesion. Armstrong's closing comments strongly belie the negative reviewer comments about her "attacking the Bible". Armstrong does nothing of the sort. She breathes life and hope into a book that has more often been used, of late, as a theological/political, anti-scientific football than a source of spiritual enrichment and growth. Read with a spirit of inquiry, Armstrong's *The Bible, A Biography*, is a resurrection, a healthy dose of CPR, for a Good Book that is dusty, unoriginal, dated, and often brutal when taken literally (except for the sexy parts, of which there are more than a few). Armstrong's book can't make The Bible into Chicken Soup for the Atheist, but it does make The

Bible rich and enticing, even to those who are more concerned about freedom FROM religion than freedom OF Religion. Doubt me? Give it a whirl, we'll chat afterwards.

What other reviewers miss in their assessments of this book is the single most important fact about this book. Karen Armstrong presents the reader in a straight forward chronological timeline the historical evolution of the Bible. As she has written many books in this area some may feel it is a rehash but I disagree. She never walked the reader from early Hebrew history all the way to today and then overlays the Christian additions and movements to the most read book in the West. She does all of this in her succinct but deeply passionate style which conveys how important the evolution of this book has been and remains to be in our current culture and society. With other books one can get pieces of this perspective but only in highly related and academically correlated subject areas. This means that for instance one can find books from a leading scholar on the Dead Sea Scrolls from the esteemed Dr. Lawrence Schiffman but one can't find a book where Dr. Schiffman addresses the entirety of what is known relative to the Bible and related ancient writings. This is what is unique about Karen Armstrong. I wrote Dr. Schiffman and asked him where to find a book like this and he referred me to the Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary. In those reference books scholars have annotated what is commonly agreed to in terms of biblical scholarship. The problem with that approach is that it is not a complete linear overview. It comes in pieces and does not address the end to end to approach that Armstrong delivers with this book. What Armstrong is doing in her works, and this book in particular, will be understood later in history as having been on the same footing as what Guttenberg did with the printing press for the bible or what Martin Luther did when he translated the good book into his native language for all of his countryman to read. The importance of making this historical information available to all of us, the common everyday people can not possibly be under rated. Armstrong writes so powerfully and with such care and precision that one also wonders whether or not she is creating new insight for the many which might someday either be incorporated or by itself seen as having the majesty of the Vedas, Psalms, Koran and several other seminal spiritual texts. Given the current state of spirituality in the world this may seem far fetched but from the perspective of where new spirituality is headed it is conceivable, more so than one might initially suspect. The scope of this book is so large that Armstrong can not go into the level of detail equally for each subject area. However what she does for us this time is to leave markers with individual names and dates so that one could delve further into an area which further interests them. I personally am such a fan that I could read 10,000 page offering from Armstrong on this subject and still be left wanting for more. I am hopeful that she may construct future writings in

such a way where we will be able to bolt them together for the production of detailed grand view of agricultural eras contributions in spirituality to our world. On a personal note, I would dearly love to see and read Armstrong take on the all of it. From the hunter-gatherer era, through the agricultural era up into the current industrial era. She has touched on the inherited structures from the hunter-gatherer world views in previous works spanning the Fareast and Near East. She also touched on the industrial eras main focus for the leading edge thinkers when she briefly discusses Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach in this book (the rise of social governmental systems). Therefore I have no doubt that she clearly sees the direction that all of this is headed from a future facing perspective. The implications in understanding the direction for humanities evolving world views requires no further qualification on import for us today. However even without such a book, Armstrong's legacy is in helping us construct an understanding for the trajectory of humanities spirituality. We hope she continues her work well into the future!!!!

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