

Brown Bags and Bibles: Rob Bell's What is the Bible?
Introduction Class: Monday February 5th 12:00 noon – 1:00 p.m.

Introduction: Twenty-Five Years In

To begin with, a bit about where this book comes from.

When I was in my early twenties, I gave my first sermon. I was hooked. I decided right then and there that I was going to give my life to reclaiming the art of the sermon. I loved giving sermons. I still do. More than ever. And sermons, I understood at that point, are something you give from the Bible. So I went to seminary, and I studied Greek and Hebrew (the two languages the Bible was originally written in), and I studied history and hermeneutics and exegesis and form and textual criticism—all so I could give better sermons.

Eventually I got a job in a church, and I started giving sermons weekly. And then one day something happened that changed everything. I had just given a sermon, and I was standing around afterward talking to people when a man named Richard walked up to me and said, You missed it.

What? I asked him. What did I miss? He then proceeded to rattle off a seemingly endless list of things that were happening in the story from the Bible that I had just given a sermon about. Background and hints and meaning and innuendo and humor and tension and history. The more he went on, the more I realized how right he was: I had missed it. And then he said, You know, Jesus was Jewish. What? Jesus was Jewish? I said. I imagine you're laughing at this point because that's so obvious, and yes, I did know that Jesus was Jewish. But not like Richard knew it. Something about that one obvious line set off an explosion within me.

Richard went on to say that Jesus lived in a first-century Jewish world of politics and economics and common stories and inside jokes, and the more you knew about that world, the more he and his message would come to life. Richard began dropping by my office with photocopied articles by people I'd never heard of explaining mikvahs and taxation rates and ketubahs and who Shammai was and who Hillel was and why that matters. Richard introduced me to friends of his who invited me to eat with them while they would discuss and debate and laugh and riff on the Bible for the sheer joy of it. And they knew their stuff. It was staggering. I could barely keep up. They would point out insightful political commentary or subversive poetry or discrepancies in the text that were actually on purpose because the writer was doing something really clever just below the surface. They'd take a verse or story I'd heard people talk about, and they'd start discussing it and turning it on its head and pointing out all the depth and surprise and power I hadn't noticed—it was like music they were dancing to.

This is in the Bible? I found myself continually asking. How did I miss this? It was like the Bible went from black and white to color, from two dimensions to three, or nine. Gradually what I was learning began to make its way into my sermons and, more significantly, into my life. And once you see, you can't unsee. And once you taste, you can't untaste.

People started coming up to me after my sermons, sometimes visibly upset, asking, How come I've never heard any of this?! This makes so much more sense! This is so much more dangerous and interesting

and provocative and timely and progressive and poetic and convicting and funny . . . Over time I began to realize that what was happening wasn't just that I was learning new things about the Bible but that I was reading the Bible in a different way. A way that I hadn't been exposed to. Until now.

And now there was no going back. Which is why I've written this book: I want to help you read the Bible in a better way because lots of people don't know how to read it. And so they either ignore it, or they read it badly and cause all kinds of harm. Some people see the Bible as an outdated book of primitive, barbaric fairy tales that we have moved beyond. And so they ignore it, missing all of the progressive and enlightened ideas that first entered human history through the writers of the Bible—ideas and ideals we still fall far short of, ideas and ideals that are still way ahead of our present consciousness and practice. And then there are the folks who talk about how important and central and inspired the Bible is but then butcher it with their stilted literalism and stifling interpretations, assuming that it says one thing and if you just get that one thing, then you've read it well. But you, I want you to read the Bible in a whole new way.

A few thoughts before we get rolling here. First, the Bible isn't a Christian book. I say that because many people have come to understand the Bible as a book for a certain group of people to claim and own and then help them divide themselves from everyone else. But the Bible is a book about what it means to be human. And we are all, before anything else, human. So if you're reading this preface wondering if this is another one of those religious books that's going to try to sign you up and convert you at the end, or it's going to have all kinds of insider language for those in the know, this isn't that book. This is a book about a library of books dealing with loss and anger and transcendence and worry and empire and money and fear and stress and joy and doubt and grace and healing, and who doesn't want to talk about those?

Second, you don't have to believe in God to read the Bible. In fact, as you'll see in these passages, the Bible is filled with people wrestling and struggling and doubting and shouting and arguing with this idea that there even is a god, let alone some sort of divine being who is on our side. If you have a hard time swallowing the god talk you've heard over the years, great—this book is for you, because these are exactly the kinds of things the writers of the Bible are dealing with in their writings.

Third, this book is all over the place. Seriously, we're going to jump from topic to topic and story to story and theme to theme, moving from poetry to history to parable to questions and rants. I did this on purpose. There is an arc, a trajectory to this book. I am trying to take you somewhere specific—but with countless twists and turns. I've arranged this book this way because this is how the Bible is. Yes, it does have an intentional arrangement to it, but there are so many moments when you find yourself thinking, Where did that come from? I've been reading and studying and exploring and rereading and rethinking and giving sermons from the Bible for twenty-five years, and I find it more compelling and mysterious and interesting and dangerous and convicting and helpful and strange and personal and inspiring and divine and enjoyable than ever.

So you can relax. There is a good chance you are going to enjoy this. And you may even find yourself thinking: How did I miss this?

Part One: There's Something More Going On: Moses and His Moisture

In the book of Deuteronomy chapter 34, we read that Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. A fairly straightforward verse, correct? Moses

was old . . . and then he died. What else is there to say? Actually, quite a bit. Read the last half of that sentence again: yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. Notice anything unusual? How about that phrase nor his strength gone? Moses has just died, correct?

Dying, as a general rule, is what happens when your strength has gone. So why does the writer want us to know that Moses died but his strength hadn't gone? A bit about the word strength here. The Hebrew scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, and in Hebrew the word translated strength here is the word *leho*. *Leho* literally means moisture or freshness. He died, but his moisture hadn't left him? He passed on but still had his freshness? One translation reads nor had his natural force abated while another reads he still had his vigor while the JPS Torah Commentary notes that Ibn Ezra understood the verse to mean that Moses had not become wrinkled. (Please tell me you're smiling by this point.) Moisture? Natural force hadn't abated? He hadn't become wrinkled? What does the writer want us to know about Moses? This phrase with the word *leho* here, just to make sure we're all clear, is a euphemism for sexual potency. That's what the storyteller here wants us to know about Moses at the time of his death. That's right, friends, Moses, the great leader of the Hebrews, the liberator who led his people out of slavery, the hero who defied Pharaoh, the one who climbed Mount Sinai to meet with God, the towering figure of the Hebrew scriptures, when he died, he could still get it up. Just so you know. Which of course raises the question, Why? Why does the writer want the reader to know this?

To answer that question, you have to go back, much earlier in the history of Moses's people, to a man named Abraham. Abraham had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham, and Moses was one of them.

Abraham, we learn in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, left his father's household and everything familiar and set out on a journey to a new land. People didn't do that at that time in history because they had a cyclical view of history in which everything that has happened will happen again. They believed that you're born into a cycle of events and you'll die somewhere in that same cycle of events as the cycle endlessly repeats itself. In other words, there's nothing new. What happened to your ancestors will eventually happen to you, and then it will happen to your children as your family goes round and round the cycle.

But then Abraham leaves. He steps out of the cycle. He walks into a new future, one that hasn't happened before. No one had ever done that before because no one had ever conceived of the world and life and the future like that before. This was a new idea in human history—that you weren't stuck, that you didn't have to repeat everything that had already happened.

But we're just getting started, because to understand the significance of that story about Abraham, you need to back up just a bit more to see that the writers of Genesis told that story about Abraham within a larger story. There's actually a progression of violence in the early chapters of Genesis, a progression that starts with a man named Cain killing his brother Abel, and then it continues to escalate as all of humanity spirals downward into greater and greater conflict and destruction. By the end of chapter 11—the chapter before we meet Abraham—people are setting up empires to oppress the masses, entire systems perpetuating injustice. How much worse can it get? That's the question hanging in the air when the storyteller introduces us to this man Abraham who decides to leave and start something new. He's leaving his home, but he's also leaving an entire way of life. The storyteller wants you the reader to know

that Abraham has a destiny to fulfill in which he becomes the father of a new kind of people to usher in a new era for humanity—one based in love, not violence. As Abraham is told in chapter 12, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. This was a new idea. They won't conquer other people but bless them?

How do you form a new kind of people that will take the world in a new direction? You have kids. And how do you have kids? You have sex. And sex involves—that's right—moisture and freshness. So when the writer tells you that Moses wasn't wrinkled and his strength hadn't abated and he still had his force, the writer is telling you that Moses was still able to participate in the creation of this new kind of tribe that would take the world in a new direction, away from all that violence and destruction. Can the world head in a new direction, or are we trapped, doomed to repeat that same old, tired cycle of conflict?

That's the question at the heart of this Abraham-and-Moses story. But we're just scratching the surface. Because Abraham's tribe eventually found themselves in slavery in Egypt, owned by the ruler of Egypt, Pharaoh. And that's where we meet Moses, who rises up in defiance of Pharaoh and eventually leads the Hebrews out of slavery and into the wilderness, reminding them over and over again of their destiny to be a new kind of people for the world.

Why is this a big deal? Because if you're a slave, you have one burning question: Will we always be slaves? Or to put it another way: Will Pharaoh always have the power?

Or to put it another way: Whose side are the gods on—ours or Pharaoh's?

Or to put it another way: Are the deepest forces of life for us or against us?

Or to put it another way: Are we here to suffer, or are we here to do something else, something bigger and better?

Or to put it another way: Does oppression or liberation have the last word?

Does injustice or freedom win in the end? So when Moses led his people out of Egypt, this wasn't just the liberation of a specific tribe—it was the answer to a question people have been asking for thousands of years: Are our lives set in stone and unable to change, or can we be set free from whatever it is that enslaves us? But it wasn't just an answer to a question. This story about Moses and the Exodus was also a warning to anyone who has ever bullied another person, anyone who has ever held their boot on the neck of someone they were dominating, anyone who has ever used their power and strength to dehumanize and exploit the weakness of another: Your days in power are numbered because the deepest forces of the universe are on the side of the oppressed, the underdog, and the powerless.

For this Hebrew tribe, then, passing this liberating and intoxicating idea along to the next generation was really, really important. That's how you change the world, by entering into your own liberation and then passing that freedom and joy and liberation along to your kids. And how do you get kids? You have sex. And how do you have sex? Well, as we all know, that involves moisture and freshness. You with me here? Do you see what we just did? We started with a few obscure English words in the thirty-fourth chapter of the fifth book of the Bible about a man named Moses. But then we dipped just a bit below the surface, and in no time we found a subtle, slightly crude, quite funny, sly, unexpected sexual euphemism that took us earlier in the story that then circled back to another story a bit later, and in no time we were dealing with violence and hope and despair and slavery and oppression and empires and imagination and human consciousness and the birth of new ideas no one had ever had before, and you were reading

along thinking about them back then but when we talked about whether or not things can change or are they set in stone and there's nothing you can do about it, you realized you've had that question before about your own life, right?

So it started with an affirmation of Moses's organ potency, but a page or two later, we were talking about the despair we all flirt with from time to time, weren't we? We started with a line about his life, which led us to a line about their life, which led us to your life and my life, which led us from the past to the present to the future to all of life. All that, from reading one line in . . . the Bible.

Why bother with such a strange, old book? Because it's a book about them, then, that somehow speaks to you and me, here and now, and it can change the way you think and feel about everything.

But isn't it actually a library of books written across a number of years by people who didn't know each other with agendas and opinions and limited perspectives? Yes, of course it is. And it's even stranger than that, which we'll get into.

But doesn't it promote violence and all sorts of primitive and barbaric behavior that we've left behind? No, and I want you to see where that view comes from and why it's so misguided.

But you have to admit that there is a lot of violence in the Bible—like the violence you skipped over just now in that retelling of the Exodus story—and a lot of it is done in the name of God or because the person believed God told them to do it. Absolutely. There are a lot of those stories in the Bible, and we're going to explore a number of them, because there's more going on there than most people realize.

But it seems like a lot of the people who talk the most about how important and central and necessary the Bible is seem to skip over and gloss and censor the most dangerous and interesting parts about sex and politics and power and the poor. Yes, so true! This is a dangerous, subversive, explicit, foul, honest, strange, contradictory, paradoxical, ruthlessly hopeful book that makes a number of rather stunning claims about pretty much everything. (Do you like that phrase ruthlessly hopeful? I'm quite keen on it.)

But isn't the Bible ultimately about Jesus and how there's a narrow way and a few people will find it and everyone else is going to burn in hell? No, it's not. It's bigger and more expansive and inclusive and embracing and enlightened than that because the Jesus story is bigger and more expansive and inclusive and challenging and dangerous and enlightened than that.

But isn't it, honestly, quite boring? If you're bored reading the Bible, then you aren't reading the Bible.

Well, then, how do you read the Bible? That's what this book is about. Because it's easy to read the Bible and miss an entire world of weirdness and joy and hope and innuendo and implication just below the surface. This book is about that world. Let's start, then, in the beginning.