

THE SOCIALISTS' GUIDE TO THE BIBLE

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pp. 19-31

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Why we started reading the Bible

In the beginning was the Word
The Gospel of John

The Bible opens with the story of a couple, Adam and Eve. All the same, we have to admit that it's a bit strange to read the Bible together as a couple. When other couples do something fun together, they go to a spa. 1,600 pages of tiny, densely written text is not what most people associate with romance.

Yet the Bible contains both love and eroticism. In Song of Songs, which is a love song between two lovers in the Old Testament, the bride's breasts are described as "twins of a gazelle" and the bridegroom's lips as "lilies". It continues:

My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.
I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
on the handles of the bolt.

(Song of Songs, 5:6 ESV)

But Song of Songs is certainly an exception. If our goal had been to have myrrh dripping from our fingers, we would have gone for something like *The Legend of the Ice People* instead. The goal of reading the Bible was more to have something to talk about. We have always liked reading and we enjoy reading together, or at least reading the same book. There was also something rather grand about reading the Bible. We're sure that quite a lot of people have planned to read the Book of Books from cover to cover sometime in their lives. Many give up somewhere or other in the five Books of Moses (the Torah), when the exciting story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt is followed by detailed instructions for building a dwelling place for the Lord.

At first we read the Bible out loud to each other. We were spending a relaxing summer in Lofoten, and it was lovely to experience the long, light days of Northern Norway while listening to each other's voices. Then we reached Exodus, the second Book of Moses, and that's where we encountered our first setback. But we were still optimistic. After all, 1,600 pages was only 1,600 pages, and even though we both led busy lives we expected to be finished by Christmas.

In the end it took us 18 months to read the whole thing. We only managed it after receiving good advice from an experienced Bible reader we met while visiting Bogafjell Church in Sandnes. This old lady had read the Bible her whole life. Her advice to us was to forget the chronological order, so as not to get bogged down in the boring bits. Instead we should reward ourselves by reading one of the fun books of the Bible each time we had struggled through a dull one. This piece of advice was like manna from heaven.

When we first made up our minds to read the Bible, it was without any political agenda. When two members of parliament are a couple, life can soon revolve around just one thing. At the Storting we read draft legislation, responses to public consultations, and committee comments. It's an important job, but sometimes we struggle to find real meaning in it when squabbling about which party did what last year.

The Bible was meant to be our little break from politics. The hope was that a glimpse of heaven would appear over the heavy, grey clouds of meetings and documents that made up our daily existence. It didn't go quite according to plan, but more about that later.

DO NOT READ THIS BOOK ALONE!

The Bible is not like other books. It actually isn't even a book, but a collection of 66 different books, like a kind of library. 39 of these belong to the Old Testament and are the sacred texts of Judaism, while the rest make up the New Testament, which focuses on Jesus and his disciples.

When you read a murder mystery, you just want to be left alone. You want to be immersed in your book without interruptions. When you get scared reading Jo Nesbø it's good fun. It's like being tickled! But getting scared from reading the Bible is terrifying: the crimes committed by God are totally different and far scarier. When you read the Bible, you need to have someone to talk to. It's almost impossible to take in what you have read without discussing it with someone else.

For how are we really supposed to understand the God we meet in the Book of Job, where the pious protagonist is punished merely because of a childish bet between God and Satan? And how are we meant to read what Paul says about women having to keep quiet at meetings, when the same Paul states something as radical as this: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 ESV)? In fact, the Bible can be so disturbing and confusing that it should almost carry a health warning: Do not read this book alone!

The Bible can also be incredibly boring. It's full of family trees and genealogies, detailed architectural plans for the temple in Jerusalem, and loads of commands and prohibitions that don't concern people today in the slightest. Not least, the Bible is obsessed with sourdough from start to finish. It begins as early as the Books of Moses, when the Israelites are instructed to eat unleavened bread for seven days. Then it keeps going right up to when Paul urges the Corinthians "to celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8 ESV). The Bible is also full of repetitions. Numbers and Deuteronomy basically repeat Exodus and Leviticus, while Chronicles largely reiterates what we have already read in Samuel and Kings.

The repetitions in the Bible have a significance that might not be so easy to appreciate while you're working your way through them, which is that they open up the Word of God to

interpretation. We often say that the Bible is the Word of God but that actually isn't correct, at least not in the literal sense of the word. While the Quran is the word of Allah, as dictated to Mohammad by the archangel Gabriel and recorded directly in Arabic, the words in the Bible are not as sacred. The Bible is not a unified text, but a diverse and contradictory one. Jesus didn't write a single word of it, and the stories about him were written down long after his death. Several important events are described in various ways. For example, the Old Testament contains two quite different accounts of the Creation. In the first one, both the man and the woman are created in God's image while in the other, God creates the woman (Eve) from the man's (Adam's) rib. Which of these accounts we choose to prioritise can greatly affect how we view the equal worth of men and women.

The Bible has always been open to interpretation. Indeed, many of the Bible stories *need* to be interpreted if they are to make any sense. Jesus's preferred form of communication is the parable. As former bishop of Oslo Kari Veiteberg has pointed out, Biblical parables are not mathematical equations. There are no clear-cut answers here. The whole point is that their message is partially concealed from us.

In other words, Jesus asks us to interpret him. The two groups who read the Bible most literally are fundamentalist atheists and religious fundamentalists. Both end up taking Jesus literally without taking him seriously.

A literal reading of the Bible today can soon seem absurd. To take another example from Kari Veiteberg: throughout history, the church has regarded marriage as sacred. Yet in the Bible, holy King Salomon had a total of 1,000 wives, without this posing a problem for the church's obsession with monogamy.

On the other hand, it has often been liberating for Christians to return to Scripture. Over the centuries, church authorities have attempted to monopolise the access to God by keeping the Bible away from people. When the Augustine monk Martin Luther came in conflict with the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, one of his main objections was that the church read too *little* of the Bible. In his biography of Luther, Hans Schilling writes:

Although it's impossible for later generations to imagine, it was not necessarily the case in late medieval Christendom that people knew or studied the Bible. Even theology students and the upper echelons of the large and complex community of priests,

monks and semi-clerical members of religious orders were seldom conversant with the Bible. Of course, Holy Scripture existed everywhere but just not as an independent text. It was concealed under layers of explanations and interpretations.

These explanations and interpretations gave the papacy quite a lot of power to use the Word of God to their own advantage. Throughout the Middle Ages, there emerged a system of indulgences, whereby citizens who feared the torments of hell could buy themselves salvation from the church. These indulgence revenues were then used to finance new church buildings and Catholic religious orders. There was a popular uprising against this system when Luther and others returned to the Biblical texts themselves, thereby discovering a personal relationship with the Word of God.

NORWEGIAN SOCIETY IS BUILT ON CHRISTIAN VALUES

Reading the Bible felt a bit like a workout. It was exhausting while we were doing it, but afterwards we felt great. All the same, not all the Bible verses feel relevant, even in retrospect. We cannot therefore recommend that people should do what we did and read the whole Bible in one go. However, we would recommend that everyone should read more of the Bible.

It's a misunderstanding that you have to be Christian to get anything out of Christianity. The Bible is the most influential book in Norwegian history. There's a reason why we have a Christian cross in our flag, why we celebrate Jesus's birthday, and why we get paid extra for working on Sundays.

We find the Bible in books, songs, literature, art, idioms, in the names we give our children and the public holidays in our calendar. There are Biblical references or allegories in everything from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise," where the first line is taken directly from the Book of Psalms (Psalm 23:4): "As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

The Bible is the source of expressions like "a thorn in the flesh" (Corinthians 12) and "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5). The *floodgates* of heaven open over Noah; Daniel is forced into *the lion's den*; while in Luke we first encounter *a good Samaritan*. And there's also

the rather more obscure character Onan, who has given us a word meaning both masturbation and coitus interruptus!

There was an astonishing amount that we recognised in the Bible, even though we hadn't read all the texts before. The story of Jonas and the whale, of Adam and Eve, and not least the Nativity – we knew all this from school and growing up. At times it felt like trying to remember our own dreams. A lot of the stories already existed in our memories somewhere, we just had to dig them out. But when we read the actual text, we understood the familiar tales in a new light. Most of our prior knowledge of the Bible was the product of a 2,000-year-old game of Chinese whispers, in which the stories about Jesus had been told from father to son and mother to daughter ever since he was crucified at Calvary.

Another misunderstanding is that it's almost dangerous for people, and especially children, to read the Bible, sing hymns or go to church. In an increasingly secular Norway, there's a tendency for anything Christian to be removed from the public sphere and reduced to a private matter instead. However, we believe that religion becomes more dangerous when it's excluded from the wider public arena and consigned to parallel societies, where the clergy and religious leaders have full control.

When we first told the outside world that we were going to read the Bible, we were met by a wave of positive curiosity. In these polarised times, politicians need to do little more to keep people happy than read something other than their own talking points. We were particularly well received in Christian circles. There's hardly a Christian community in the country that hasn't invited us to visit.

The few negative reactions we received were naturally on social media. The most usual one, strangely enough, was that we should have read the Quran instead of the Bible. These comments didn't come from Muslims who wanted to convert us, but from people who wanted to convince us of the dangers posed by Islam. Here were people who believed that the best way to defend Christian values was to discard the Bible and delve into the Quran. These are people who have become so obsessed with Islam that they could set off on a crusade and leave Jesus behind. Personally, we chose to read the Bible not because it was a random religious text, but because it is *the* defining religious text of our entire cultural tradition.

There is no denying that Norwegian society is built on Christian values. You don't need to be Christian to be charitable or forgiving, or to believe that all people are equal. Even so, the emergence of these ideas in our culture has been linked to Christianity. During the eighteenth century, when ordinary people began to mobilise in the first democratic popular movements, one of the catalysts was religious revivals such as the Haugean movement. The Norwegian labour movement has its roots in this low-church tradition.

At a time when self-help literature is spreading worldwide, it's worth reminding ourselves that the Bible can also be read as a kind of self-help book, yet one with an existential dimension. It's full of rules for how you should live your life, and we would go so far as to claim that Jesus has even more to contribute on that front than the popular Canadian philosopher Jordan Peterson. Take, for example, the Bible's message on forgiveness! Forgiving others is one of the hardest things we do. Many of us have savoured the fleeting pleasure of taking revenge on someone who has hurt us. Our glee doesn't last very long because afterwards we nearly always feel worse. Our vindictiveness proves meaningless and is in fact a kind of meanness.

One of the nastiest words in any language is "unforgivable". Practically no actions exist that cannot be forgiven. This is also the reason why the Norwegian criminal justice system doesn't practise the death penalty or life imprisonment. Because even the worst criminals should on principle have the possibility to start a new life when they have finished serving time for their sins. The Bible teaches us that everyone can be forgiven, almost regardless of what they have done, as long as they acknowledge their mistakes and turn over a new leaf. Forgiveness is something we all need, up to several times a day, and for some of us *always* the morning after. It's a fundamental component of all human interaction. Yet we find it so difficult to forgive others all the same. The Bible helps us with this, and it has been helping people forgive each other and themselves for over 2,000 years.

The Bible offers comfort in the face of death, disease and disasters. There's a reason why so many people gathered in churches after the terror attacks on the island of Utøya and in Oslo on 22 July 2011. The Bible also helps give meaning to existence. A lot of young people nowadays are searching for a deeper meaning in their lives. At a time when most things are in flux, many are seeking firm footholds. This is why big ideas have made a kind of comeback. For some people it's enough to listen to ten-hour podcast episodes about the death of liberalism. For those who want to go all the way, there's always the Bible.

The Bible seeks to provide answers to a number of life's big mysteries. Some of these answers are laughable today, such as the Earth being created in seven days. Yet despite all the scientific progress humanity has made, we turn to the Bible to understand what happens to us when we die, or to get answers to a question science will never be able to answer: just why we are alive. All of this is important to both believers and non-believers.

These were some of the things we reflected on while reading the Bible together. Unfortunately, though, there was something else that kept coming to the fore: the very politics we were trying to escape by delving into the old Bible stories.

CHRISTIANITY MAKES A COMEBACK IN POLITICS

As already mentioned, we started reading the Bible without having any political agenda. The last thing we wanted was to use this reading project in our work. It was the summer of 2024. In the US, Joe Biden had just pulled out as the Democratic presidential candidate in favour of Kamala Harris, who was enjoying a few short weeks of positive attention and good polling numbers. Then everything fell apart for the Democrats, and Donald Trump was re-elected as the US president. Trump mobilised swathes of Christian voters. After an assassination attempt, Trump claimed several times that God had intervened to save him. When he won the election, he said that "God saved me for a reason," and during the inauguration ceremony he proclaimed that "I was saved by God to make America great again." Trump's son Eric followed up on this, saying that "the hand of God was on his [father's] shoulder," and that his father was saved by an angel when a bullet grazed his ear at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania.

It certainly isn't unusual to start thinking about God after a near-death experience. Yet there are a lot of evangelical Christians in the US who believe that Trump has actually been chosen by God to save America. It's extraordinary that such an un-Christian person could be as popular with Christian voters as he is. Trump is rich and arrogant. He tramples on the weak, and apparently has no trouble telling lies. Furthermore, his sexual morals are questionable at best. There is also reason to doubt that he was much of a believer before becoming a presidential candidate. In an interview with Bloomberg in 2015, he refused to cite his favourite verse from the Bible, at least. When asked whether he preferred the Old or the New

Testament, he answered: “Probably equal.” Some months later, however, he had landed on a favourite Bible story, the one in Exodus about revenge: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

None of this matters to Trump’s Christian fundamentalist supporters. In their eyes, Trump is a kind of Cyrus figure. Cyrus the Great was a Persian king who, according to the Old Testament, freed the Jewish people from their captivity in Babylon. He did this despite not being a believer himself. Cyrus is also the only non-Jewish figure in the Bible who is referred to as *Messiah*.