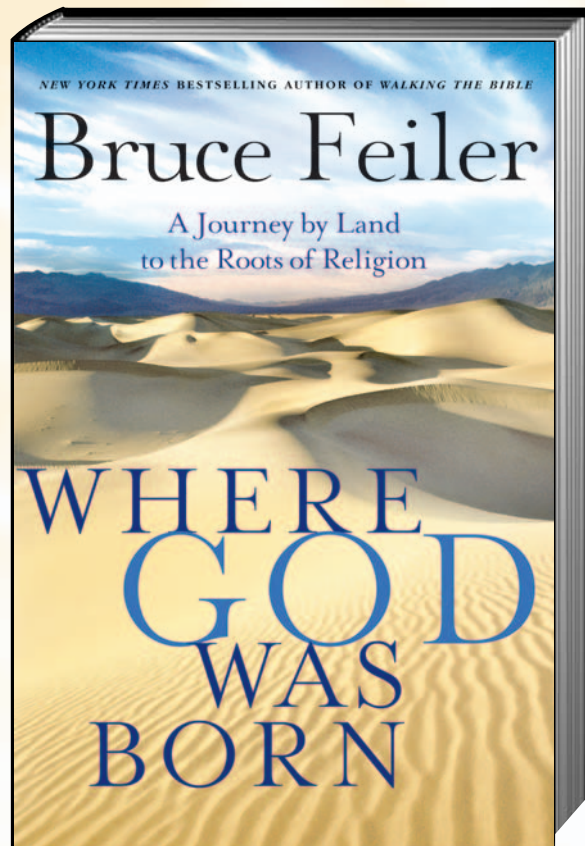


# STUDY & DISCUSSION GUIDE

An Interfaith Companion for Study  
Groups of all Religions and Devotions



## Contents

### I.

**Introduction:** Why Study *Where God Was Born*? And How?

### II.

Discussion Prompts, Study Topics, Assorted Questions

**A. We Pulled Out Our Bibles....:** *Setting the Stage for Dialogue*

**B. Getting Started:** *Wrestling with the Word and Embracing Difference*

**C. Introduction:** *Be Strong and Very Courageous*

**D. Book One:** *Land* (Israel) Chapters 1-3

**E. Book Two:** *Exile* (Iraq) Chapters 1-5

**F. Book Three:** *Diaspora* (Iran) Chapters 1-3

**G. Conclusion:** *With Gladness and Joy*

### III.

A Conversation with Bruce Feiler

### IV.

A Brief Biography of Bruce Feiler



---



## I. INTRODUCTION:

### Why Study *Where God Was Born?* And How?

#### *Fusing the Timely and the Timeless*

Bruce Feiler's *Where God Was Born* affords readers from all walks of faith a vast window on a range of religious, historical, archaeological, philosophical, and moral concerns. It is an ambitious episodic travel narrative, one that manages to combine a battery of timely, high-stakes questions about the nature of contemporary civilization with a range of timeless, elemental questions about humanity's ambivalent relationship with God. Here, the timely and the timeless are situated in rich and telling counterpoint, as readers are transported from the modern-day tensions of Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Tehran to the sites of such landmark Bible sequences as Joshua's lightning land conquests, David's bloody establishment of theocracy, and Esther's intricate machinations in Persia.

A book as diversely populated, multi-linear, and wide-ranging as *Where God Was Born* invites a similarly atypical approach to studying and discussing it. As such, the discussion prompts in section II below are not comprehensive, A-to-Z overviews or rigidly prescriptive, page-by-page analyses of Feiler's work. Think of them as icebreakers, intended to stimulate free-flowing thinking, active listening, and open-minded, anything-goes conversation. Some fascinating threads in the book may go unremarked below, and many questions and observations beg to be expanded, challenged, and/or reshaped altogether by fresh inquiries. Each of the observations and questions provide discussion leaders with possible perspectives for approaching the book with study groups, each invites further thematic and/or scriptural unpacking, and each aims chiefly to create a springboard for generating engaging ideas and exploring larger questions—religious, political, and ethical alike—that extend beyond the boundaries of this book and into our daily lives.


## II. DISCUSSION PROMPTS, STUDY TOPICS, QUESTIONS:

### (A.) Setting the Stage for Faith-focused/Religious Dialogue

#### *We pulled out our Bibles...*

What does it mean to have faith in these uncertain, often frightening times? That is, how do we reconcile the paradoxical face of religion today? On one hand, religion endures as a source of hope, meaning, and existential consolation for millions. On the other, religion resides at the very heart of much of the conflict and unrest in our world, from the ever-present threat of terrorism around the globe to the increasingly polarizing debates about values and the separation of church and state at home. In stark, binary terms, religion has persisted across the centuries as the chief spark for both peace and violence, love and intolerance, life and death. Among the many revelations offered in Feiler's book, the observation that this troubling paradox has been around since religion's birth is perhaps the most compelling. And indeed, it is this paradox that sets the stage for Feiler's abiding quest. How can we rediscover the hope of religion in the midst of so much devastating turmoil? Is religion just a source of war, or can it

---



---

bring about peace? Feiler seeks answers to these questions in the Biblical past. And as he observes in the Introduction, he is not alone: “People of all faiths [are] seeking wisdom in the past.”

## **(B.) Getting Started**

### *Wrestling with the Word and Embracing Difference*

“I’m interested in strengthening my connection to the Bible,” Feiler explains to Avner Goren early in the book, “because it’s deeper than religion and may hold clues for making peace among the faiths.”

In establishing a structure and/or agenda for a *Where God Was Born* discussion, study groups might take their cue from Feiler’s own ideas regarding discussions of faith. Feiler wrestles with the biblical text and repeatedly invokes the shared heritage—by way of Abraham—of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions. Such recognition also requires an acknowledgement of difference—and a frank exploration of its nuances. To embrace an interfaith ideology, and to dream of peace and solidarity in a modern-day climate rife with holy warriors is important; but to do so is not to turn a blind eye to the frightening realities of religion’s complicated role in our roiling, violent world.

“I believe in dialogue,” Feiler writes in Chapter 4 of Book Three: Diaspora. “I have committed myself to the idea that by going back to our common ancestor—Abraham—Jews, Christians, and Muslims can build a foundation of mutual trust.... But I’ve also come to believe something else: Unless we focus on our differences—and how to accommodate them—interfaith dialogue can become bland and directionless.”

In the larger view, to explore the issues raised in *Where God Was Born* is finally to explore the ways history, religion, and current events color our individual perceptions of life. What are our hopes and convictions, and what are our prejudices and fears?

## **(C.) Introduction: “Be Strong and Very Courageous”**


*“What better way to confront my doubts about religion and consider the future of faith than to travel to the land where God was born?”*

### **Introduction Overview**

*The collision of politics, geography, and faith is the guiding concern of Bruce Feiler’s new book. Opening with a dazzling helicopter ride over the West Bank, the introductory chapter limns the cultural and political landscape of Israel across the millennia, from the times of Abraham and Joshua to the modern era. With the legendary General Yoram “Yaya” Yair as guide, readers follow the course of Israelite conquest and consider Joshua’s military genius as he carved a warpath through the Promised Land. Feiler also steps back to reflect on what compelled him to write this particular book, at this particular time. Finally, the Introduction neatly establishes the schema that will drive *Where God Was Born*: the Biblical past is to be employed as a revelatory touchstone for a range of georeligious and geopolitical issues that define and distinguish our own time—for better or worse.*

---

---



## Bible Connections in the Introduction

While the Introduction primarily parses the **Book of Joshua**, it is also concerned with the **Hebrew Bible** as a whole, including the **Pentateuch** and the cycle of books comprising the **Deuteronomistic History**.

### Introduction Discussion

- How did 9/11 affect Feiler's feelings about organized religion, and how has the nature of his relationship with the Bible taken on new textures and complexities? How have your own feelings about religion and the Bible evolved/shifted in recent years?
- One potential way for us to approach the Introduction is to think of it as the author's mission statement—a straightforward but soulfully appointed exercise in traditional goal-setting. So, then: what is the mission of this book? Where will it take us? What are its chief concerns, intentions, themes, and queries—religious, political, personal, or otherwise? As a group, try to distill the essence of Feiler's Introduction into a brief, two- or three-sentence statement.
- What compelled you personally to participate in this religion-centered study of *Where God Was Born*? What do you hope might be gained from “exploring [today's] world through the prism of the Bible?”

### **(D.) Book One: “Land” (Israel)**

*“Which is more important, living on the land or living a life of God?”*


### Book One Overview

*Chapter One: Acquaints us with the stark realities of life in contemporary Israel; considers the nature and provenance of what Avner Goren calls Israel's “lack of identity”; and illuminates the epic life and curious legacy of David, the eponymous “man of blood.”*

*Chapter Two: Speculates on David's subterranean conquest of the impregnable Jerusalem, and assesses his canny establishment of the city as his kingdom's capital; explores the geography and demography of modern Jerusalem; describes Bathsheba's sly maneuverings enabling Solomon's inheritance of the throne; and evaluates David's contribution to and abiding influence on Jewish faith and history.*

*Chapter Three: Recounts Feiler's circumnavigation of the Temple Mount, “ground zero in the battle for God”; describes Solomon's precocious knack for forging alliances and expanding empire; and reflects on the circumstances paving the way for exile—and how this exile will come to erode (for a time, anyway) the primacy of “the land” as the people's most crucial connection to God.*

---



---



## Book One Bible Connections


Book One focuses on **The book of Judges** and the books of **Samuel** and **Kings**. Special attention is devoted to: the Israelites' dissatisfaction with the judges' inadequate leadership; David's slaying of Goliath; **David's** storied monarchy; the embattled reign of Solomon; the split kingdoms of Israel and Judah; and a disappointed God's decision to flush the people from their promised land and send them back into the wilderness and **Babylonian** exile.


## Book One Discussion

### Chapter 1: "Man of Blood"

- Discuss the character of David. Who exactly was this man? Murderous bandit? Gifted psalmist? Visionary king? Covetous adulterer? How do you interpret the Bible's rendering of David? Is it an elaborate gloss, an apology for someone who was essentially a self-serving mercenary? Or is it a strikingly honest portrait of a ruthless but undeniably great man possessed with matchless charisma and a potent will to power. How can we reconcile the two portraits? What does Feiler have to say about all of this?
- What are the potential dangers/pitfalls of assessing certain aspects of the Bible (the story of David, say) from a contemporary vantage—with our emphasis on democratic values, civil liberties, and the separation of church and state? What might be a more useful lens through which to view the Bible's narratives? An archaeological lens? Or historical? Or allegorical? Explore the implications of each of these approaches.
- What do we learn about Feiler's traveling companion, Avner Goren, in this chapter? What is the nature of his faith, and how does it color his work as an archaeologist? And how might he answer the questions in the previous bullet?

### Chapter 2: "Your Throne Shall Be Established Forever"

- What is Zionism? How and under what circumstances has the meaning and significance of this term shifted and evolved across the centuries?
  - Discuss the patriarchal nature of the Bible. What moral lessons are we to take from a work that categorically holds women in such low regard? As part of your discussion of this, revisit Yael Lotan's fascinating take on Bathsheba and biblical women in general [see pp. 79-83].
  - Near the close of the chapter, Feiler classifies David's reign as "an experiment" in theocracy, an absolute merging of church and state. Considering the legacy of David's rule, what can we learn from this experiment? Can we usefully apply any of these lessons to our own times? [Your group might also consider how this experiment in monarchical rule led to the rise of the Prophets?]
- 
- 

- 
- 
- How does God’s relationship with his people begin to shift over the course of Samuel One and Two and Kings One and Two? Think of the words of such Biblical scribes as **Micah** and **Zechariah**, and consider what qualities God was beginning to look for in the leaders who succeeded King David. [What value is the quality of humility, for instance, beginning to acquire at this point in the Bible?]

### **Chapter 3: “The House of the Lord”**

- “My current journey [in Israel] was teaching me something deeper. Land is not the destination” [p. 119]. What is Feiler getting at here?
- Revisit the final pages of “The House of the Lord.” In the wake of so many epic conquests and brutal wars in the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian exile awaits. And in exile resides the chance for redemption. If the Israelites were moving inexorably away from a land-focused religion, then what kind of a religion were they moving toward, lost as they were in exile?
- Consider Feiler’s resolution to find meaning and faith “beyond the stones.” How might such a resolution play out in the hearts of the citizens of contemporary Israel, where these same stones comprise the very heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Recall Avner’s judgment that, “As a nation, you need land. But as a religion, you do not.”
- Compare Feiler’s and Avner’s final reflections at the close of Book One with the resolute words of General Yaya in the Introduction. How does Yaya feel about the land?

### **(E.) Book Two: “Exile” (Iraq)**


*“I came to Iraq...to look for the prophets, to learn how the greatest religious minds of antiquity coped with pain, disappointment, and fear. I came away with a babel of prayers.”*

#### **Book Two Overview**

*Chapter One: Follows Feiler as he: journeys to the war-torn landscape of Iraq in quest of the secrets of the Cradle of Civilization; struggles with the misgivings and fears that such a trip necessarily inspires; examines the prophets’ claims that exile leads to salvation; identifies the Garden of Eden as the dominant narrative of Western history; and argues that democratic liberty is hardly an alien notion to Iraq; in fact, it was born there.*

*Chapter Two: Leads readers on a history-spanning tour of the legendary city of Ur; showcases the phenomenon of the ziggurat, those mammoth and deeply poignant manifestations of humanity’s eternal quest for divine proximity and consolation; serves up a delightful anecdote—call it ‘clash of the desert divas’—starring literary grande dame Agatha Christie and iconic archaeologist Katherine Woolley; and contends, in concert with a Southern Baptist military chaplain, with the austere realities of religious devotion in wartime.*

---



---

*Chapter Three: Takes stock of the overwhelming cultural losses wrought by war and subsequent looting; and performs a searching analysis of Psalm 137, investigating its enduring popularity and curiously transcendent relevance across religious boundaries.*

*Chapter Four: Introduces readers to a range of present-day Iraqis scrambling to adjust to the new realities of their ravaged homeland; charts the course of Baghdad's rich, millennium-old heritage as a bastion of science and philosophy; shines a light on the harrowing experiences of "the last rabbi" in Baghdad; and affords readers a front-row seat at a raw and determinedly plainspoken interfaith gathering.*

*Chapter Five: Features a one-on-one, religion-themed dialogue between the author and the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq; serves up a head-spinning explication of the Book of Jonah; and provides a reflective coda focusing on three key lessons which the author has gleaned from his time in Iraq.*

### **Book Two Bible Connections**

Book Two takes a fresh look at the Eden story in **Genesis**, identifying it as the archetypal exile narrative. The primary focus in Book Two's five chapters concerns the **Prophets** (most notably **Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jonah**) and the **Psalms** (and their recurring theme of exile and suffering as the only true paths to redemption and salvation).

### **Book Two Discussion**

#### **Chapter 1: "In the Garden of Eden"**

- Revisit Feiler's exploration on pp. 130-138 of the theme of exile and its role in the books of the prophets. Discuss the Bible's recurring pattern of creation, destruction, and re-creation. Explain what Feiler calls "the unforeseen goodness of going into exile."
  - What compels Feiler to risk a journey through Iraq in the first place? What does Iraq represent to the author? How does his decision to go affect his marriage? "The emotion I felt was not just fear," Feiler tells us. "It was also gratitude. Returning to the cradle of faith had reminded us of our own." What is Feiler getting at here (see p. 128)?
  - In this chapter, Feiler's narrative architecture achieves a potent juxtaposition. The author crafts a mesmerizing portrait of ancient Iraq as a lush and literally Edenic landscape, a civilizational crucible from which such elemental contributions to human life as the art of writing first emerged. But Feiler also offers us an unnerving parallel portrait of Iraq—one firmly rooted in a twenty-first century roiling in brutal, fear-saturated chaos. Discuss Feiler's writing style for a moment. What stylistic/tonal and structural/organizational choices did he make in order to create this stark juxtaposition for us?
  - "Humans might blight the garden," Feiler writes on p. 156. "But Eden never dies." Unpack this metaphor, particularly in the context of the two Iraqs (ancient and modern) we come to know over the course of Book Two.
-

---

## **Chapter 2: “Come, Let Us Build a City”**

- To what degree do the extensive parallels that link Sumerian religious narratives with the Bible (including some virtually identical storylines) undermine the singularity and/or “truth” of the Bible?
- How does your knowledge of these parallels influence your own perception of and approach to the Bible? And in what ways does it affect the intensity of your religious faith? What is Feiler’s take on all of this [pp.168-70]?

## **Chapter 3: “By the Rivers of Babylon”**

- Reread Psalm 137, that achingly beautiful riff on sadness and dislocation. Describe your relationship to this psalm in your own life. What is it about this particular psalm that enables it to reach across thousands of years and still deeply affect its readers?
- How do you interpret the abrupt shift in tone that distinguishes the culmination of Psalm 137? It is a singularly violent about-face—from elegiac regret to bloodcurdling rage and virulent spite. In the course of your discussion here, you might revisit Feiler’s thoughts on pp. 208-9.
- In Jeremiah 29, God suggests that Judaeen exile can be a good thing. Here, God seems to command his people to, in effect, assimilate. Because wherever you may roam, God will be with you. Discuss your interpretations and reactions to this newly flexible God. What were the Prophets up to here? How were they revolutionizing the very essence of religion? What, ultimately, could this new face of religion hope to achieve?

## **Chapter 4: “City of Peace”**

- What sense are we given in this chapter of the daily lives of Baghdad’s residents? Of the few we meet here, what character traits shine through most powerfully?
  - What kind of a man is Emad Levy, “the last rabbi of Baghdad”? Describe the nature of his religious devotion. What was his response to the American invasion? And what are his prospects for the future?
  - In what is perhaps the core set-piece of the entire book—the moment in which all of Feiler’s thematic strands come together—“City of Peace” introduces us to U.S. Army Chaplain Lew Messenger and invites us to sit in on a dialogue whose participants include: Imam Mohammad Saleh al-Ubaidy, a Muslim; Chaplain Messenger, a Lutheran; Feiler, a Jew; and a multi-denominational mix of U.S. soldiers and Iraqi workers. What happens here? What frustrates Feiler about the dialogue initially? How, and to what degree, is this frustration assuaged?
  - Revisit pp. 237-8 and discuss Feiler’s suggestion that, of all the sacred words and stories we humans have at our disposal, perhaps the words in the second half of the Hebrew Bible offer the strongest opportunity for finally dissolving our separations and resolving our fiercest
-

---

disputes. What are these opportune words? That is, what is “the fertile, common ground” that this often overlooked part of the Bible has to offer?

### Chapter 5: “A Future with Hope”

- In what ways does Jonah’s experience function as a kind of microcosmic retelling of the Hebrew Bible, from Creation to Exile? And, in turn, how do certain elements and motifs in Jonah’s odyssey presage the life and death of Jesus Christ? What does Feiler take to be the most important message in the Book of Jonah? Do you agree with him? Explain.
- Has Feiler found what he was looking for in Iraq? Explain. What three lessons does he take with him?
- Summarize the story of the Tower of Babel. How has Feiler’s interpretation of God’s actions in this story shifted as a direct result of his experiences in Iraq? Distill the essence of Feiler’s modified view of Babel on p. 261. How is this view connected to the liberal democratic ideal of pluralism? [Out of many, we are one...]

### (F.) Book Three: “Diaspora” (Iran)

*“We sat facing each other, alone in the hills of western Iran, in a place that as a child I had doubted would ever be possible: Jews at home in the world.”*

#### Book Three Overview

*Chapter One: The Feilers journey to smog-infested Tehran; wonder together at the vast disconnect between the closed, repressive regime of present day Iran and the culture of openness and freedom that largely defined ancient Persia; and investigate Zoroastrianism’s myriad influences on today’s dominant religions.*

*Chapter Two: Provides a fascinating capsule biography of Cyrus the Great, famed liberator of the captive Israelites in Babylon (and possible messianic figure); and reveals the astonishingly forward-thinking civilization cultivated by Darius I, a man who fostered a truly multicultural society—a functional Babel of sorts—and the world’s first “united kingdom.”*

*Chapter Three: Introduces readers to a poignantly resilient and warmly openhearted community of Iranian Jews; ruminates on the nature of Jewish Geography and the consequences of Diasporan sprawl; and considers the various lessons that might be taken from the curiously ambivalent Book of Esther.*

#### Book Three Bible Connections

Book Three continues to investigate many of the Hebrew Bible narratives explored in previous Books One and Two. In addition, **Ezra** and **Isaiah** feature prominently in the accounts of Cyrus and Persia. The **Book of Esther** figures prominently in Chapter 3: “A Crown of Beauty.”

---

---



### Chapter 1. “Let There Be Light”

- Describe the tenets of Zoroastrianism. What are its contributions to the underlying architectures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? How does one distinguish Zoroastrianism from Manichaeism?
- What were your understandings of Iranian history and culture—particularly its roots in biblical narrative—before reading Feiler’s book? What surprised you most as you read? In what specific ways have Feiler’s images and depictions come to enrich, challenge, or even contradict altogether your previous notions?

### Chapter 2. “His Anointed One”

- Who is the titular “Anointed One”? Recount as a group the course of Cyrus’s storied life, and catalog his contributions to Jewish liberation.
- The vast expanses of unexcavated land in modern Iran leave us, of course, with many archaeological questions. But in the long view, how important is it to you—in terms of your own faith—that the stories of the Bible be subjected to exhaustive archaeological and historical scrutiny? If we put each and every verse of the Hebrew Bible through the evidentiary wringer—what might such detective work yield, whether positive or negative? If incontrovertible discoveries are made, how might they potentially be misused by contemporary peoples? Explain.


### Chapter 3. “A Crown of Beauty”

- Feiler describes being struck by a profound and wholly unexpected sense of community in Iran. What happens to Feiler and Linda in Iran? How are they affected by their visit? What does this chapter as a whole have to say about the notion of “home” in a global Diaspora?
- Discuss Linda’s reaction to the story of Esther. How have your understandings and/or appreciations of this seminal story been enriched or complicated by this chapter’s inquiry?
- On the last page of Chapter 3, Feiler asks his wife what she would say if her child wanted to dress up like Esther in observance of Purim. What is Linda’s answer? Discuss the tone and impact of this final scene.
- Discuss as a group your different conceptions of Diaspora Judaism. How does Feiler’s portrait of Iranian Jews color and/or enrich these conceptions?

### (G.) Conclusion: “With Gladness and Joy”

*“Why does the Hebrew Bible not really end?  
‘Because each of us has to write our own ending...  
You may end your traveling, but if you enter the Bible, you  
have to keep on living, keep on thinking, keep on choosing.  
Keep on walking.’”*

---



---

## Concluding Discussion

*On taking stock, making connections, continuing the dialogue, and laying the groundwork for interfaith healing*

- In the final pages of *Where God Was Born*, Feiler realizes that it is no longer enough to be a passive recipient in his relationship with God. “I must be an active partner. Just as Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah talk back to God, I can talk back to religion... I can make my own faith.” What does this mean? How do we do this—make our own faiths, ‘write’ our own texts, shape our own narratives?
  - Why is it so important that this kind of active faith-making be done in community, rather than in isolation?
  - Discuss *Where God Was Born* in the context of Feiler’s previous Bible-themed books, *Abraham* and *Walking the Bible*. What themes link the three works? And how have Feiler’s perceptions developed over the course of the three narratives—whether regarding the significance of land, the idea of Diaspora, or the prospects for the interfaith movement?
  - Return to the ‘mission statement’ you formulated back during your discussion of the Introduction. How does it hold up at this point?
  - What were your reactions to some of the big-picture ideas and conclusions put forth in *Where God Was Born* regarding how we might resolve the tensions that separate the dominant religions in our world today? “If Jews, Christians, and Muslims go back to our roots, we will be in peace,” Imam Mohammad Saleh al-Ubaidy says on p. 238, directly echoing what is perhaps the central message in Feiler’s book. How can this work in reality? How can looking to the Biblical past provide the key to peace in the present?
  - Consider Feiler’s heartfelt words about keeping the Biblical text alive in our hearts and lives. Do you consider yourself “an active partner” in your relationship with God? How might an active partner endeavor to continue the kind of religious dialogue that has begun with this study group?
  - *Where God Was Born* ends on a note of infectious hope. When it comes to the prospect of peace among the religions, to what degree do you share this hopefulness? In the face of daily newspaper headlines that threaten to smother our hope, what actions can we take to achieve genuine change? How do we transform hope into conviction, and conviction into tangible success?
  - Certain scholars and pundits have suggested—with varying degrees of seriousness—that one viable path to peace would be to completely expunge all religion from public life, so that we may foster a genuinely pluralist civilization, one that is free of fear and hate. How do you respond to this line of thinking? In discussing your responses, consider Feiler’s own muscular response to such arguments on p. 170:  
*“To live in peace does not require the removal of religion from our lives; it requires the discovery of the beneficent elements within religion that have lived alongside the hateful ones since humans first began to make sense of their environment.”*
-



---

### III. A CONVERSATION WITH BRUCE FEILER

A conversation with Bruce Feiler...

**Q:** Near the start of *Where God Was Born*, you recall feeling a unique sense of urgency to write this particular book. “I had wanted to go on my first journeys back to the Bible. I needed to go on this one.” Tell us a little more about this. Why Israel, Iraq, and Iran? Why now?


BF: A few years ago, I went to the library and retrieved the April 16, 1966 cover story in *TIME* Magazine entitled, “IS GOD DEAD?” The article suggested that God had retreated forever from public life and that religion was dead as a matter of influence in world affairs and would never return again. What a different a generation makes. Today, the biggest news stories include terrorism, the Middle East, the Ten Commandments, gay marriage. The biggest movie of recent years: *The Passion of the Christ*. The biggest book: *The DaVinci Code*. Religion is bigger today than at any time in the last century. I realized that if I wanted to make sense of this situation I should go back to the origins of religion itself. I had to go back to the place where God was born to figure out: Is religion tearing us apart, or can it bring us back together? That journey led me to the second half of the Hebrew Bible, which takes place in Israel, Iraq, and Iran.

**Q:** As a Jew growing up in Georgia, you witnessed your parents’ ambivalent relationship with their heritage and faith—at one point, you describe the way they “tugged at the gossamers of assimilation.” In what ways do you feel these memories inform—or possibly belie—the religious, political, and historical concerns in your writing today?

BF: When I was growing up, I, like many Jews, cheered what appeared to be the receding of faith from everyday life. The further religion got from our lives the better our lives would get, I thought, because persecution had been such a burden to Jewish families for generations. But the older I get, the more I realize that religion is not going to be easily marginalized by one of its wannabe successors – science, capitalism, consumerism. Religion has grown stronger in the last 30 years because it’s broader than any country. It addresses the dignity of all human beings. It is universal. Religion also breeds overconfidence, and one challenge for today’s believers is to rediscover in the fire of faith the source of warmth that can overpower the flames of destruction.

**Q:** One of the most striking passages in the book finds you engaged in a freely associative conversation with your wife, Linda: the two of you parse the Book of Esther, assess the state of women’s rights in contemporary Iran, and explore the consequences of Jewish assimilation around the world. This portrait of a marriage rooted in intellectual exploration, emotional generosity, and mutual discovery is deeply affecting—and it also powerfully underscores the larger themes of your book. What were your intentions in adding such a personal dimension to your narrative?





---

BF: First, you should know that my wife reads most things that I write and it turns out she LOVES this question! When I set out to write *Walking the Bible* nearly ten years ago I insisted that it would not be personal. It would be about archaeology, not me and my own search for God. What a fool I was. The longer I have traveled on this road the more personal my travels have become and the more willing I have become to probe those parts of the experience. The way to tell a really big story, I think, is to tell a really small story. Also, while writing about the raw emotion of *Walking the Bible* was difficult, it was, inevitably, the part of the book that people appreciated the most. So this time I went even further. Linda is a central part of my emotional life, and my work life, and I thought putting that story on paper was the most honest way to convey what happened to me.

**Q: *Where God Was Born* is being published at a time of great tumult and uncertainty in the Middle East—to say nothing of the perpetual, low-flying dread afflicting life in the United States and Western Europe. Tell us about your hopes and expectations for human civilization in the coming decade. What success might Bible-rooted, interfaith dialogue have in providing consolation—or at least perspective—in this so-called age of terror?**

BF: I think it's safe to say that the biggest question in the world today is, "Can the religions figure out a way to relate to one another that is not by killing one another?" I think the answer is pretty much up in the air – and definitely up to us. It's either open warfare among the faiths, or it's some alternative. And the only path to alternative is some kind of dialogue. I think the Bible can play an important role in this conversation because, from its opening verses, it suggests that chaos is a natural state in the world, and the only force strong enough to calm the chaos is words. Don't forget, God uses words to create the world. Words! Words are only hope.

**Q: Tell us about your travels and experiences since finishing *Where God Was Born*. What can we look forward to reading next?**

BF: I spent half of every month, for six months, back in the Middle East – in Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan – shooting a three-hour documentary for PBS on *Walking the Bible*. It was a challenging and, at times, dangerous experience, but the footage is spectacular, high-definition camerawork shot by a British crew of exceptional talent. We hope to have it on the air in early 2006. Then, a few weeks after we finished filming and a few days after turning in the manuscript for *Where God Was Born*, my wife gave birth to two healthy, hearty, heaven-sent identical girls. Since then, I've been doing a lot of traveling between my bedroom and theirs in the wee hours of the morning. I hope they make this journey in peace sometime in their lives.





---

## IV. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Feiler is the New York Times bestselling author of seven books, including *Abraham*; *Walking the Bible*; *Learning to Bow*, and *Under the Big Top*. Also the writer/presenter of two PBS miniseries, he is a frequent contributor to *National Public Radio*, writes for numerous publications, and is a contributing editor at *Gourmet* and *Parade*. A native of Savannah, Georgia, Feiler lives with his wife and daughters in New York City.

