

7. Why did Karl Jaspers term the years 800 to 200 b.c.e. the Axial Age? What happened in the span of these centuries? And what is it about our own era that has led some scholars to argue that we are in the midst of a new Axial Age? What parallels exist between then and now?

8. What connections and parallels exist between the Bible and the Sumerian religious narratives that preceded it? Do these parallels undermine the singularity of the Bible? Why or why not? In “Come, Let Us Build a City,” Feiler finds unexpected comfort and strength in the likelihood that some Bible stories were influenced by and even lifted from Sumerian sources. Explain his reasoning here.

9. Discuss Feiler’s extended exploration of the Book of Jonah in “A Future with Hope.” What is it about this brief, 48-verse story that has inspired so much fascination and spiritual scrutiny? 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?

10. Catalog the different messages that have been drawn from Jonah’s story over the centuries—whether by Jews, Christians, or Muslims. In Feiler’s view, which of these messages—regardless of their religious provenance—is paramount?

11. Discuss Feiler’s writing voice and the lucid structure of his travel narrative. What role does dialogue play in the narrative? What words would you use to characterize his style?

12. What kind of person is Avner Goren? What do we learn about the nature of his passions and beliefs, and how do these beliefs inform his work as an archaeologist? How does Goren’s voice and presence color the action and tone of *Where God Was Born*? [Your group might also compare and contrast Feiler’s portrait of Goren in *Walking the Bible* and *Abraham* with the Goren we come to know in the new book.]

13. Consider the diverse ideologies and personalities of the people with whom Feiler dialogues in this book, including: the staunchly Zionist General Yoram “Yaya” Yair in “Be Strong and Very Courageous;” the activist/archaeologist John Malcolm Russell in Iraq in “By the Rivers of Babylon;” Chaplain Lew Messenger, the impassioned seeker of interfaith dialogue in “City of Peace;” and Pallan, the Zoroastrian graduate student in Iran in “Let There Be Light.” How do these—and so very many others—inform Feiler’s own reflections about the journey he has undertaken?

14. 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 evolved and shifted over the course of the three narratives—whether regarding the notion of land, the idea of Diaspora, or the prospects for the interfaith movement?

15. 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?

16. Describe the tenets of Zoroastrianism. What are its contributions to the fundamental architectures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? How does one distinguish Zoroastrianism from Manichaeism? [Revisit Book III, Chapter 3.]

17. In “A Crown of Beauty,” the final chapter in Book III, 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 passage have to say about the notion of “home” in a global Diaspora? Describe your reactions to the tone that imbues the final pages of this chapter.

18. In the final pages of *Where God Was Born*, Feiler realizes that, in his relationship with God, it is no longer enough to be a passive recipient. “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 is going on here? What does it mean, finally, to make one’s own faith? And why is it so important that such faith-making be done in community, rather than in isolation?

19. 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 page 238, directly echoing what is certainly a central message in Feiler’s book. How does this work? How might looking to the Biblical past provide the key to peace in the present?

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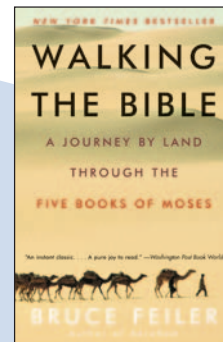
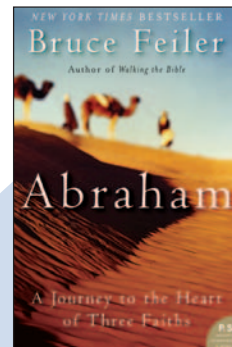
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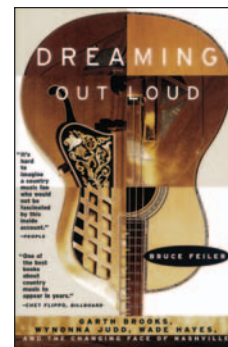
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FURTHER READING—THE BRUCE FEILER LIBRARY

Abraham
A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths
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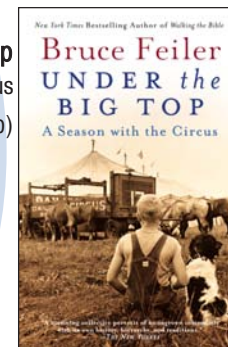


Walking the Bible
A Journey By Land Through the Five Books of Moses
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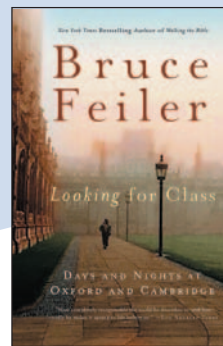
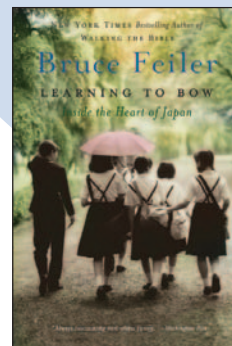


Dreaming Out Loud
Garth Brooks, Wynonna Judd, Wade Hayes and the Changing Face of Nashville
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Under the Big Top
A Season with the Circus
0-06-052702-1 (pb)

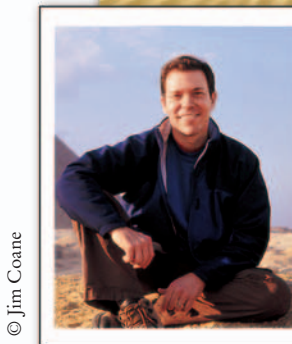
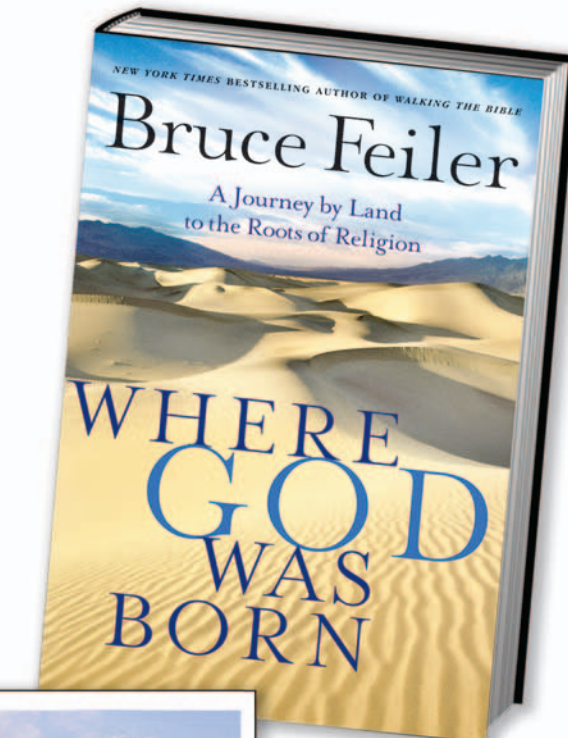


Learning to Bow
Inside the Heart of Japan
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Looking for Class
Days and Nights At Oxford and Cambridge
0-06-052703-X (pb)

WHERE GOD WAS BORN



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A Journey by Land to the Roots of Religion

Bruce Feiler
0-06-057487-9
\$26.95/\$36.95 Can.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Feiler is the *New York Times* bestselling author of seven books, including *Walking the Bible* and *Abraham*. The writer and presenter of two PBS miniseries and a frequent contributor to National Public Radio, Feiler is a native of Savannah, Georgia. He lives with his family in New York City.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Is religion just a source of conflict or can it be a source of peace?...

A Brief Introduction to Where God Was Born

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

Where God Was Born opens a rare window on a range of religious, historical, archaeological, philosophical, and moral concerns. In his most ambitious and provocative narrative to date, *New York Times* best-selling author Bruce Feiler seamlessly combines a battery of timely, high-stakes inquiries into 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 bold face-off with the king of Persia.

Through it all, Feiler’s explorations—whether archaeological, spiritual, or cultural—are each infused with a winningly intimate and conversational tone, as though Feiler’s aim in his writing is to speak to each of us directly, in confidence: *Yes, this is my journey, but it is also yours. Let’s talk; let’s sort this out.*

Culminating with an inspiring, hope-fueled vision of global and religious solidarity—wherein different faiths and disparate cultures unite in a shared commitment to peace and understanding—*Where God Was Born* is a thrilling fusion of expertly paced travel writing, exciting historical detective work, and vitally forward-looking religious inquiry.

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?

A: 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, and 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?

A: 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?

A: 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?

A: 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: If you were to don some crafty disguise in order to drop in on a random reading group discussion of your book, what questions would you be certain to bring to the table—and what issues would you find it most important to explore?

A: What a wonderful question. You know, in one of my parallel lives, I am a contributing editor at *GOURMET* Magazine, and our editor, Ruth Reichl, mastered the art of disguises. So look around: I might be among you! Meanwhile, what would I ask: 1) What’s the most painful thing you learned about your own faith? 2) Who would you most like to have dinner with, King David, Jonah, or Cyrus the Great? 3) If you could ask my wife one question about the author of *WHERE GOD WAS BORN*, what would it be? 4) Where was God born?

Q: Any appetizing suggestions you can make for culinary-inclined hosts looking to add some Bible-themed hors d’oeuvres and potables to the reading-group mix?

A: When my mother hosts book events, she serves, among other things, hummus, pita bread, olives. When I encouraged people to host grassroots, interfaith discussions, called *ABRAHAM* Salons, for my last book, my friends at *GOURMET* offered a baklava and a brownie recipe. Triple Chocolate brownies. One for each faith! You can find them online, at www.brucefeiler.com, if you click on the DISCUSSIONS button on the front page of the site. And while we’re on the topic of the site, I’d like to

invite at least one member of the group to write me a report of the conversation. I’m proud to say that I’ve responded to every email that’s come into the site in the last five years.

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

A: 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.

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The following are intended to enrich your conversation and help your group find new and interesting topics and angles for approaching this book.

1. Of all the destinations illuminated over the course of *Where God Was Born*—from modern-day Israel, Iran, and Iraq, to ancient Babylon and Persia—which did you find the most compelling? In what specific ways have your perceptions of each of these places been enriched, challenged, or even transformed altogether by the portraits in this book?
2. Consider also here Feiler’s own perceptions with regard to the places listed above. How do his feelings, fears, and/or passions shift and evolve as he moves from city to city, nation to nation?
3. “God relates to us on two levels: the level of faith and belief, and the level of nationality and being a people,” Avner Goren tells Feiler on

p. 118. “As a nation, you need land. But as a religion, you do not. That’s the essence of what we’ve learned so far on this journey.” Unpack your reactions to Avner’s tidy summary here. What is he getting at? What conclusions does “Book I: Land”—most notably Chapter 3—come to regarding the relationship between religious identity and physical geography?

4. Building on the previous question, revisit the final pages of Book I. As the sun sets over the Western Wall, Feiler reflects on the central importance of geography in Jewish history, but then he sets for himself a startling resolution: “I must sever my attachment to the land. I must end my devotion to a physical symbol. I must look beyond stones.” What does he mean? What is to be found beyond the stones? Discuss the groundwork Feiler establishes here for all that follows in *Where God Was Born*—from the legacy of the Prophets, to the redemptive possibilities of physical exile, to the endurance of faith in the Diaspora.
5. An abiding question throughout *Where God Was Born* concerns the historical accuracy of the Hebrew Bible. At one point, Feiler calls it “the tantalizing, tender relationship between the details in the text and the facts in the ground.” Discuss Feiler’s treatment of this relationship at different points in the book, beginning with his theorizing on the viability of Joshua’s lightning conquest of Canaan and continuing through his ruminations on Esther’s power plays in Persia.
6. On a personal level, describe your own approach to the Bible as a text. A vast spectrum of approaches to the Bible persists in the academic, scientific, and religious realms today. At one end is the nominally secular, “Bible as literature” movement (championed by such humanities scholars as Robert Alter and Frank Kermode); at the other is the strictly literalist, Darwin-is-devil-spawn tradition. In between, of course, lay myriad nuances of conviction and qualification, tangibility and abstraction, faith and skepticism. Where do you place yourself on this spectrum? How does this book inform and/or affect your position?