



Where God Was Born

By Bruce Feiler
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Introduction

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* bestselling 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.

Discussion Questions

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?
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?

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.