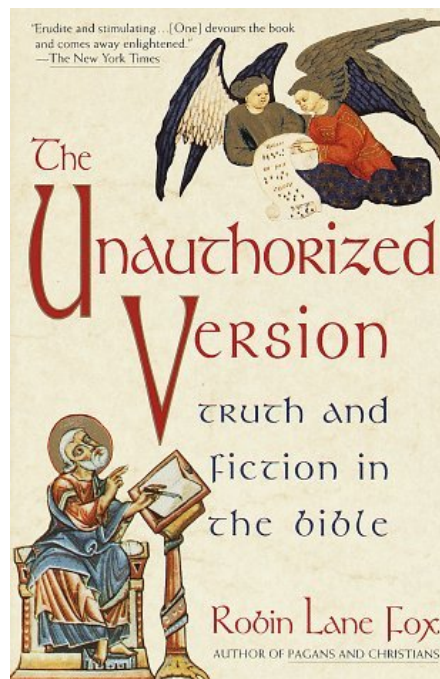




The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible

Robin Lane Fox

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The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible Robin Lane Fox

The author of *Pagan and Christians* examines the scriptures as history, myth, and literature, explaining their inconsistencies and locating their core of truth. "Unfailingly incisive, thought-provoking, humane."--The Economist.

The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible Details

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Chris says

There's an enjoyable and interesting bool lurking within - the subject matter is fascinating and RLF has clearly 'done the reading and for the most part is an engaging enough guide. Unfortunately, it really needed a good editor. The style is long winded and frequently gets bogged down in detail. Structurally it lacks any clear overall argument and feels like individual chapters have been placed at random with no obvious relationship with each other. Not a bad book by any means but could have been much better.

Crystal Hunter says

Worth the read.

Erik Graff says

I've read a number of classical historian Fox's books before as well as some of his articles on gardening in the London Financial Times and enjoyed them. This, his attempt to engage the Judeo-Christian canon as embodied in its King James edition (why that outdated text? Just because he, Fox, was raised with it?) as an historian of the period, was not so enjoyable.

Other historians of the period have approached the bible from the same perspective and done so, in my opinion, better. One thinks, for instance, of that great popularist Michael Grant--very accessible, very readable. Fox, however, demands a heck of a lot from the reader, this book being one that requires a bible at hand to trace his citations,

Fox is also idiosyncratic to an extremes, his conclusions 'as an historian' being often much at odds with the consensus of modern biblical scholarship. The prime example--a secondary one being his treatment of Nehemiah--is found in his treatment of the fourth gospel, that attributed to 'the beloved disciple', aka 'John'. Here Fox makes the claim that this alone of the gospels may stem from one who knew Jesus, that it is, in this sense, the foremost of them. This turns most scholarship on the head. In fact, as Fox admits, John gives a radically different account of the ministry of Jesus than that given by the synoptics. It also appears to have been composed last. Fox also treats the matter of 'Q', the sayings source behind Matthew and Luke, as subject to doubt--another eccentric claim, hard for anyone who's actually gone through the texts of the synoptics, magic marker in hand, to credit.

But maybe there is something to Fox's approach. Perhaps here, in this book, we get a sense of classical historical criteria being transposed to the much more tilled field of biblical history. After all, we've 10,000 or so separate holographs of the Christian Scriptures and only six of so of Aeschylus. Perhaps, therefore, classical historians are more accustomed to bold surmises on relatively little textual foundation. Whatever the case, I found this book both challenging and dubious.

Jay says

Someone I hike with saw that I was reading this book, and asked if I was an atheist. I said that no, I'm a Christian. She was surprised that I would spend time reading an atheist/academic's critique of the Bible, so I said that it would be pointless to only read stuff I knew ahead of time I would agree with. She apparently has a pretty low opinion of most Christians' intellectual curiosity, which tells me that she doesn't know many.

I actually became an admirer of Robin Lane Fox when I read his 1986 book *Pagans and Christians*, which described how Roman civilization made the transition from a pagan society to a Christian one. It was scholarly, even-handed, detailed, and the prose was evocative and engaging.

So I was surprised to learn that Fox wrote this book several years later, because his writing style seems more immature and his outline a little less well-defined. I don't find a lot to argue with when he describes, say, the timelines of the creation and editing of books of the Old Testament, or his argument that the Gospel of John (which he calls "the fourth gospel," being unwilling to assert that John was actually the author) is the only one of the canonical gospels that was a first-hand account, even though Mark's gospel predates it. I lack the academic background to contest any of these contentions.

But I'd at least like to check some of his claims, so I wish the book were footnoted or end-noted. There are extensive page notes, but they're more cumbersome to use. I get that aesthetically it's better not to clutter up the pages of the text, but when he makes confident claims like King Solomon never had a visitor the likes of the Queen of Sheba, I'd like to know where to start following up on that.

Fox is not above using straw-man arguments, particularly in the early part of the book where he's examining the Genesis story. He tries to force us to believe that a creation day equals exactly a 24-hour modern day, then he turns around and attacks that argument. He never explains why we shouldn't think that a creation day was allegorical. The effect is that he loses the reader's trust early on in the book, and while his arguments do improve in the later chapters dealing with New Testament subjects, we're always waiting for his next "trick." This is a sad disservice to his obvious mastery of the overall subject.

Some of his arguments are just logically weak, such as the claim that "thou shalt have no other gods before me" is an admission by Yahweh that there are other actual gods, in the sense of supernatural deities. He seems to (disingenuously) not recognize the commonly held tenet that anything that takes our focus off God--money, sex, drugs, fame, etc.--can become a "god" to us. I heard this from my earliest days in church; perhaps his atheism and lack of church attendance works against him here.

At moments, a sneering contempt for Christians and Jews (at least religiously observant Jews) jarringly breaks the surface of the otherwise detached and scholarly dissertation. He says Old Testament Jews sacrificed animals in the temple "in order to keep [God] happy." Surely he knows that temple sacrifice wasn't to amuse God, but to be a propitiation for sin. It's why Jesus was called the Lamb of God--the perfect sacrifice who transcended all others. If Fox doesn't know this simple basic fact, his credentials as a scholar are suspect; if he does know it, then some respect for his subject matter is clearly lacking.

In the end, Fox makes a compelling argument that the Bible is not as perfect and internally consistent as many Christians would like to believe. What he doesn't deal with, until the last few pages and then seemingly grudgingly, is that that fact isn't really important to the strength and surety of a Christian's faith--something that an atheist really can't know about, no matter his academic credentials.

Andrew Schirmer says

From earliest years right into manhood, like any other nonconformist child I had the Bible poured every day into my helpless consciousness, till there came almost a saturation point. Long before one could think or even vaguely understand, this Bible language, these 'portions' of the Bible were douched over the mind and consciousness, till they became soaked in...And I must confess, my first reaction is one of dislike, repulsion, and even resentment. My very instincts resent the Bible.

--D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

As I slogged through this quite sympathetic 'evaluation' of the Bible, D.H. Lawrence's words stayed with me. This book is a consideration of the Bible on the grounds of truth, as well as historical and literary merit. Fox more than ably amalgamates/summarizes biblical scholarship up to the present day. Oh, the book is elegantly (never ponderously) erudite, witty in places, but by the end I breathed a sigh and was glad to be done with the Bible for a while.

Fox is also the Gardening columnist for the *Financial Times*. Steven Runciman, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Jan Morris...it's not often that I'll admit to anglophilia, but...goddamn!

Johanne says

Hmmm - I think I have a problem with RLF's writing style (I had the same issue with his *Into to the Classical World*) he is an erudite and well well respected academic yet this book at time wanders, repeats ideas and doesn't not always make his conclusions clear. That said there is much of interest here and he does show conclusively that the bible is a very human construction set firmly within the events & political / religious requirements of various eras. I particularly liked his exploration of the key stories of genesis and the accounts of the birth of Jesus, these are clear and informative, and make it entirely obvious that fundamentalist/literalist readings are wholly untenable.

In order to get the most from this book you need a really good knowledge of the bible - I thought mine was OK but I had to frequently check stories and references in a KJV bible so it made this comparatively slow going.

Not an easy read but good for providing evidence for refuting "the bible says...." type arguments

Steven Williams says

Fox has written a smooth and easy to read narrative with some insightful comments. That's the best I can say. His historical interpretation appears to rely on few if any primary sources. Practically all works cited are of secondary sources with no knowing if they rely on primary sources themselves. From other works that do rely on primary sources I find that Fox's hypotheses are suspect about what in the Bible can be considered historical. First and foremost is the texts that are relied on are far from original versions. He does explore this some in reference to the Old Testament. However, he seems to skate around the problems with New Testament texts; although, he does mention some additions and interpolations in the texts that do survive; none earlier then the third century. Some biblical scholars even say that the search for the historical in the Bible should be abandoned based on the unreliability of the texts. I am not saying that there's nothing of value in the book, especially when Fox moves on to how the Bible should (or might be interpreted).

TalGarik says

Very interesting read, there are many books aiming to "tell the truth" about the Bible, most of them - from Christian authors as from atheists - are biased, they use the Bible to prove their point. The first trait of this work is that Robin Lane Fox loves the Bible and its history, his quest here is driven by a genuine desire to explore the complicated and extraordinary history of these books, so I guess that everyone who is fascinated by the Bible will find much to appreciate in this unauthorized version.

Shane Moore says

I'm interested in this subject, and there were lots of tidbits of information, but the author's presentation of it was almost unbearably dry and slow.

David says

A fascinating introduction to Biblical studies, showing how the texts that make up the Bible we have are amalgamations of many sources, how many prophecies from Isaiah etc were later additions tailored to explain to the populations of the two ancient Kingdoms of Judah and Israel why their histories were unfolding as they were, and above all to preserve a unique sense of identity in an unstable world.

Of course, all this would according to Christians and Jews from their respective standpoints be seen as the workings of the Lord behind the scenes and make no difference to their faith. And in the end it does ultimately come down to faith. The more complex the ramifications of how the heavily edited and manipulated texts came together over the millennia, the more opaque the divine workings. Simple worshippers don't care whether Paul, Solomon, David and the Gospel writers actually wrote what is ascribed to them – which in most cases they didn't – and it doesn't really matter.

I think of religions as fauna on the mental plane, with their own survival tactics and feeding strategies. I think of them as the ancient monstrosities in Lovecraft's novella, 'At the Mountains of Madness', brilliantly-coloured and exotic organisms spouting tentacles and tubular structures, moving through a surreal landscape and in permanent competition with one another, products of mankind's primitive corporate and group mentality.

It's easy to see why devout followers of different religions experience epiphanies and visions and are convinced that their religion is the true one. Whenever the mind is completely focused it experiences clarity and insight and great physical feats can be accomplished, whether those of the Knights of St John at Malta, or of the first Muslims who spread the new faith like wildfire, or indeed the German National Socialists who turned the economy around and the first Bolsheviks who overthrew the Tsarist regime in Russia. There are plenty of self-help books which emphasise the power of positive thinking and the (usual goal these days) large amounts of money that can be made if you want it enough.

The major religions have built-in elements that on the one hand promise eternal life and rewards to their adherents and on the other hide an iron fist inside a velvet glove as an implicit warning to any heresiarchs. They appeal to the primitive herd mentality, and individualists and intellectuals have often fallen foul of

them. It's no accident that in any dictatorship the intellectuals are usually the first targets – the last thing they want is for anyone to start thinking for themselves. Christianity, Islam, Communism... The Serbs in Bosnia and Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia sought to wipe out the intelligentsia first, and Stalin kept a tight rein on them. Etc etc etc.

You bring three people together and they'll start arguing and bitching about absent friends, and power structures start sooner than you can blink. Self-reliance tempered constantly with experience, and sympathetic understanding for the masses of thick shits who follow anything that moves (as long as it's not them first) and who are almost completely paralysed by a fear of being different in any way from their good neighbours, is the way to go I think.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall drift through life in a semi-coma, concerned only with pay cheques, career progression and pension policies. I think this is the essential message of the Bible to its followers, Christian and Jew alike – do as you're told, or there'll be trouble. The weaker, more obedient, more trusting and more simple-minded you are, the more you are blessed. The warnings against intellectual pride are all over the place, like secret police.

The two-word inscription at the entrance to the Oracle at Delphi is worth any number of tortuous Qurans and Bibles – 'Know Thyself'. It's the work of a lifetime, and organised religion is merely a distraction that shifts the focus and the responsibility and seeks to capture the human spirit with gross promises and threats.

I imagine a Sci-Fi future where the different religions are assigned their own planets where they can rant and rave to their hearts' content without bothering the rest of us.

I was reading a quote recently in a biography of Pushkin, assigned I think to Diderot – something about the humanist dream of seeing the guts of the last priest being used to hang the last Tsar.

Joey Brockert says

Mr. Fox has done a lot of interesting studying for this work. He brings together a lot of various analysis and other readings of the Bible and comments on his choices of what is actually true or possible that is written about in the Bible. In the Introduction he does admit to not believing in God, but he does believe (admire?) in the Bible. He is honest and admits when he goes against the grain of scholarly works, or you can take what he says with a grain of salt. He does weave a good argument and story of what the Bible is and does, but this is based on those tenuous arguments. For instance he is of the opinion that Jesus was forty (40) or forty-five (45) at his death.

In the end he finds the Bible to be mostly made up stories. The external and internal evidence just do not match. He does not find much to be concerned about with that because the purpose the Bible was written was to support the priestly class of the Jews. With that in mind, he does not find the stories to be out of line, or their factualness to be problematic. The funny thing is that at one point, when explaining that in the hundred or so years before Jesus there were various 'Bibles' floating around, some with thirty books, some with twenty, but in an aside he mentions that there are no 'authorized' versions of the Bible. The Catholic church has it's 'Imprimatur,' but that does not authorize it any more than the King James version is, just saying it is acceptable to the powers that be in said church.

Daniel B-G says

Drab, lifeless explanation with condescending tone throughout.

Old-Barbarossa says

A bit of hard work at times but well worth the effort.

Traces the development of the bible as a text.

Looks at the text with the same eye as he looks at other classical works in other books. Asks the same level of evidence and compares to contemporary sources, Assyrian/Babylonian/Persian/Greek/Roman etc.

Contrasts the gospels and looks at when things were written against when they claim/appear to have been written.

Thankfully not as much ref to pottery as some of his other work.

Avoids the issue of faith and focuses on the bible as a historical document and asks what worth it has as this.

Steven Peterson says

This is a fascinating book by a scholar of the classics, Robin Lane Fox. A recent book of his, "The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian," is very nicely done. His historical competence is pretty clear-cut. The premise of this book is straightforward: the Bible is internally inconsistent and, externally, on a number of occasions inconsistent with known history. He forthrightly notes that he is not a believer, so that one can account for his own religious views as they evaluate his argument. Those who believe in the truth and factual nature of the Bible will doubtless not be strongly approving this volume.

He begins by noting that (page 7): "'The Unauthorized Version' is a historian's view of the Bible. It is a book about evidence and historical truth, not about faith. It is unauthorized because it addresses questions which the Bible itself obscures. . . ."

Two approaches. The first, the document is internally inconsistent. He notes the two very different stories of Creation, the inconsistencies and contradictions across the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and in many other books of the Bible. He argues that there were "editors" who rearranged and edited prior versions of Scripture to better fit their perspective. He notes the various hypothesized editors, such as J and E. He speaks of how D ("Deuteronomist") revised previous documents to fit a specific vision. One may well not be convinced of different "editors" at work, but it does help to explain some of the internal inconsistencies.

The second approach is to note that some of the "history" in the Bible is inconsistent with other historical documentation. For example Luke's chronology does not work. Also, there is no evidence that Augustus ever decreed that everyone go to their home town for an enumeration. Indeed, there is much evidence that this was not likely to have been the case.

At that, Lane is very sympathetic to the work of "John" in the Gospel of John. It is not always clear to me why he is so accepting of this and so much more critical of the others (although it is clear that there are some real historical problems in some of the other Gospels).

This is not easy reading. There is a close textual analysis of the Bible, and it can get pretty tedious as he recounts, for instance, the very different views of David across different books in the "Old Testament." His historical documentation to support his thesis that portions of Scripture simply could not have happened can also lead to some MEGO ("My eyes glaze over"). But his command of textual analysis and historical

phenomena produces a provocative thesis. Even those who disagree and might wish to simply dismiss his critique would probably be better advised to confront it and address his points.

So, don't expect a quick read. Expect challenges to standard understandings of the Bible. But understanding and confronting his challenge can be a productive venture.

Evamaria says

A mirror of a fallen man That's what Robin Lane Fox calls the Bible, whose mix of facts and fiction he traces in this densely written book, which he describes as "a historian's view of the Bible".

Covering everything from Genesis to Revelations, he makes it clear where the various authors get their history wrong (almost all of the time), but, despite being an atheist himself, he also stresses their goals and motivations in writing (and editing) the texts that comprise the Bible. He also goes further, highlighting that for centuries, even millennia, there was no such thing as a biblical canon, a fixed set of texts used by both Jews and Christians.

As a Christian myself, I found Fox' work fascinating - even when explaining where the Bible and history clash (always mentioning the room for error due to the very limited written and archeological sources) and how certain explicit contradictions came to be (for example the opposing stories of how David ended up at King Saul's court), he always remains respectful, both to the material and to the religions based on it. Especially interesting to me was his opinion that the Gospel of John is based on the eye-witness testimony of the "beloved disciple" (with the exception of the last chapter, which was added later).

There is also a detailed bibliography for those that want to delve deeper into the scholarship behind the Bible, which is something I always look for in non-fiction works, because nothing infuriates the former student in me more than unsourced statements.

Overall, the book was neither easy nor quick to read, and it presents so much information that I fear I've already forgotten most of them. But for anyone interested in "Truth and Fiction in the Bible" (as the book's subtitle states), who can separate Faith and Fact, this is definitely recommended.
