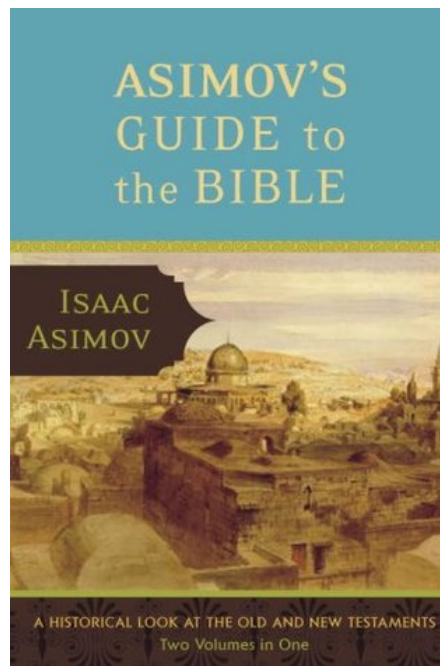




Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The Old and New Testaments

Isaac Asimov , Rafael Palacios (Illustrator)

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In "Asimov's Guide to the Bible" the noted author Isaac Asimov explores the historical, geographical, and biographical aspects of the events described in the Old and New Testaments. In doing so Asimov illuminates the Bible's many obscure and mysterious passages, producing a valuable text for anyone interested in religion and history.

Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The Old and New Testaments Details

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Bill says

Asimov, best known as a science fiction master, took a long and hard look at the Christian Bible and came up with observations that never seemed to occur to the many Bible teachers I had as a boy. Asimov is a much better Bible teacher than they are. Having said that, this book would almost certainly be unwelcome in most Bible study sessions. I won't elaborate - but be sure to find a place for it on your reference shelf.

sologdin says

Quick and fun, chatty, non-academic--displays unnecessary erudition at times (e.g., at the first mention of any place name, Asimov typically notes anyone and anything of world historical importance connected therewith)--this text is basically the learned scientist's book report after reading seven translations of the Bible, plus a few commentaries & treatises on same.

The primary object of criticism is the geography, history, and linguistics of the biblical text--he does not get involved in doctrinal disputes, except to note that they existed, and to describe what might have been at stake historically (such as in the circumcision fights during the time of St. Paul). He doesn't present any scientific critique (noting only that the Bible miscalculates the value of pi in describing dimensions of Temple furniture)--but the scientific background of the writer is always present, insofar as miraculous and supernatural events are summarily dismissed as legends, metaphors, or other types of fictional accretions.

He doesn't footnote the views of other commentators, usually distinguishing them from his own views by marking others' theses as "some have said" or "the usual position." His own views on disputed issues appear to be marked out as tentative submissions, noting "perhaps" or "speculation." The non-academic style can be a bit frustrating in this respect.

He does give special attention to passages from the Hebrew scripture that later writers in the Roman period found compelling.

As an example of the awesomeness herein, consider Asimov's basic reading of the deuterocanonical text of Judith:

"This now adds an additional element of anachronism. We have the Assyria of the seventh century B.C. under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar of the sixth century B.C., which sends its army under a general of the fourth century B.C. to attack a re-established Judea of the fifth century B.C. Not a century is left out."

His opinion, for instance, on Judas Iscariot is interesting, too, as it adopts the contrarian thesis that "Iscariot" is not "man of Kerioth," a Judean designation (as distinguished from the other apostles, who were Galilean) but rather marks Judas as a member of the sicarii. Once Asimov elects a view, such as here, he runs with it, and the rest of his interpretation adheres thereto.

His reading of the Old Testament has definitely been influenced by higher criticism and other source studies--so we might consider his views in this regard to be serious; he certainly is pleased to point out dates of composition, interpolations, later amendments by editors, potential redactions, and so on in challenging the traditional theories of authorship. He's also keen on marking out purported prophecies that were actually

written after the events they allege to predict, or errors in certain bona fide prophecies.

He has also spent time with the records of Egypt, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, and so on--or, at least, distillations of those records--in order to cross-examine the biblical account, which often enough is the only source for its allegations. He is honest enough to note when external records corroborate the biblical account, and seems to regard the biblical account as generally rooted in history, even if he wants to quibble with certain details, and dismisses the more fanciful material as not worthy of historicity.

Overall, interesting, lively, goes by much faster than one might foresee for 1200+ pages. Includes many maps, chronologies, indices, &c. It doesn't assume much in the way of familiarity with scripture--though he doesn't summarize all events in the text. A good example of the latter point is that his discussions of the Greek epistles is limited to the geographical and linguistics notes, with the points of doctrine only grossly mentioned, if at all. That should be considered a feature rather than a bug, of course.

Recommended for serious persons.

Brian says

I have a sentimental attachment to the book. I found a copy in a city library while living in the Bible Belt. I mentioned it to some heavily christian friends and the book tragically ended up being destroyed in a book burning. It took me over 14 years to find a replacement copy.

It is not anti-religious, even though it was written by Asimov, an atheist. Instead, the book describes the world at the time when the books of the bible were written. It also gives possible scientific or cultural explanations for some of the miracles described in those books.

I would say that this book would be an excellent addition to those interested in the christian bible. It is a little dated now, because we know a lot more about the time periods now than we did a few decades ago.

Michael Fishman says

If I had to pick books that forever changed the way I look at history, this one would seem like a dark horse. But believe it or not, Yitzchak Izaak Azimov (yes, the sci-fi author) managed to alter the way I look at both history and the bible.

The history is slightly dated--hey, it was written in the 1960s. And Asimov was not an historian by profession. But little do people realize that the author of the Foundation trilogy also wrote many other books; in fact, he has covered in his books just about every area in the Dewey Decimal System. I'm told that his Guide to Shakespeare is also worth checking out.

The book is structured in the same order as the Bible. The focus of the book is to explain how contemporary history (or contemporary to Asimov) views the episodes of the Bible. Asimov is not a minimalist: whenever possible, he tries to take the Bible seriously as an historical document. Sometimes (such as Jonah, Job, Esther, and Daniel), this is impossible; in those cases, Asimov makes no bones about it--he declares those books fictitious (or historical fiction).

But other times, he does his best to reconcile history with the Bible. For example, the Exodus. Many serious scholars doubt that the Exodus happened (at least the way it is portrayed in the Bible). Asimov does his best to salvage the story. He tries to approximate which Pharaoh could have been the antagonist of the story. He knows he's grasping at straws, but at least he tries.

Other times, he fills in gaps. Like the Hittites. We now know that the Hittites were once a mighty empire. But why are they only mentioned in passing? He surmises that during the apex of their empire, the Israelites would have been in Egypt, and thus wouldn't have been concerned with them. By the time they migrated to Canaan, the Hittite Empire had waned.

There are also times he uses extra-Biblical stories to bolster the story. Like with Hezekiah, the Assyrian version of events varies slightly. He fills us in on that story.

This work is not meant to be taken as a serious scholarly piece. But for an amateur or casual historian, this is a good read. It is lucid, accessible, and eye-opening.

Thomas.harrop says

Asimov goes through the entire Bible and provides the best current analysis of where all the material came from and points out inconsistencies and problems with the texts. I found it very enlightening.

The Fizza says

Isaac Asimov was one of the most prolific writers of his time. Having written, or edited, more than 500 books and an estimated 9,000 published letters and postcards. He has published in nine of the ten major categories of the Dewey Decimal System.

While a professor of biochemistry at Boston University he is primarily remembered for his Science Fiction works, several of which had been adapted for film in recent years.

In 1967 he decided to put the Old and New Testament of the bible into historical context. This edition is the two volumes in one for a whopping 1296-pages and includes maps by the artist Rafael Palacios.

This guide goes through the books of the Bible in King James Version order, explaining the historical and geographical setting of each one and the political and historical influences that affected it.

Asimov even goes as far as providing biographical information about the main characters. In essence Asimov seems to consider the bible as one of the most important history books ever written, and treats it as such.

There is no theological commentary, just information. For those of you who really want to know "what's really going on" as well as "what's happened before" this guides to the Old and New Testament includes biblical verse, footnotes, references and subject indexes.

Suggested for anyone who wants to know about the arc of history.

Mehrdad Mb says

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Alexandru says

It does not matter if you are an atheist or believer - the book is an excellent detailed historical analysis of the period of time covered by the Bible. The best analysis from a historical, geographical and logical standpoint. I was always looking for a scientific analysis of the Bible and Asimov did that. The connections between multiple myths and mythology and the Bible, the logical explanation of what is described in the Bible, the revealing of many errors in years and names of people described in the Bible. And al of it is done in a very objective and neutral manner. A must read for anyone interested in the topic of Human history and the influence of religion on it.

Ron says

While Asimov purported to just be dealing with the factual background of the Bible--and he *does* provide many interesting, if trivial facts--his point of view is plainly that the Bible (and assumedly all books of faith) are fiction. Given that orientation, it's still a useful resource.

G. Branden says

What I gained from this book was a level of Biblical literacy that I had been sorely lacking.

As a lifelong atheist with a wholly secular upbringing, I feel I have enjoyed much good fortune relative to those indoctrinated by religion from a young age; on the other hand, many literary and cultural references, and even a few jokes, have passed me by. Since elementary school I have been better versed in Greek, Norse, and Egyptian mythology than I have been in modern religion. Even in a secular society that is something of a handicap.

Having been aware of this title for many years, but knowing that I have a strong bias in favor of an Asimov-penned treatment of most any subject and wanting to broaden my horizons a bit in reaction, I searched high and low for a book that would fulfill my needs, but kept failing to find something written from an unabashed secular--and scientifically rationalist--viewpoint which was also written with character and not with such brevity as to be contemptuously dismissed as a "Cliffs' Notes" summary of the Bible.

Well, in my view, here it is--despite my efforts, I ended up with Asimov after all. It should go without saying that this title is not for everyone, but for people who share the void in their cultural literacy that I had, I must regard Asimov's work as **essential**. Asimov is not what some folks call a "militant" atheist, and his *Guide to the Bible* has practically no overlap with recent provocative titles like Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and Hitchens's *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* . Foremost, his book does what it says on the tin--it's a guide to the Bible rather than a critique of Judaism, Christianity, or religion generally. Asimov's

approach to these scriptures is simply that of a thoroughgoing empiricist. He therefore disregards miracles and creation stories as myths. Then too, many mainstream Christians and Jews share that assessment, and thus they stand to gain from Asimov's approach as well.

Another of Asimov's goals (as candidly set forth in his Introduction) is to place the historical events set forth in the Bible within their broader contexts. In contemporary histories of the ancient world, the events that were of all-consuming importance to the Israelite tribes, the Jews, and the early Christians are usually beneath notice, being irrelevant to the larger turning wheels in the rest of the Near East. Asimov is unrelenting in using secular historical sources to tie Biblical events in with the doings of the great ancient empires such as the Mittanians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Mycenaeans, Babylonians, Greeks, Parthians, and Romans. In some cases, particularly in the books of Genesis and Exodus, Asimov has to speculate or ground his conjectures on extra-Biblical scholarship, and often can only establish rough contemporaneity. But as the historical records become less murky (and as the Jews became more concerned with posterity once they had enjoyed, and then lost, a kingdom of their own), matters firm up considerably.

A further benefit is that Asimov is nearly as careful as the editors of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* in covering apocryphal materials and documenting their status as such. For example, 1 Maccabees is an invaluable record of a crucial period in ancient Jewish history. Its utter lack of both miracles and canonical status in the Protestant tradition is a correlation I will leave to other cynical minds. The Maccabean period also presents us with the interesting spectacle of ancient Jews making converts to their religion by the sword (under the kings John Hyrcanus I and Aristobulus I)--not exactly the picture of Judaism that folks like Elie Weisel paint.

I find all of this invaluable.

It is worth noting that Asimov wrote his *Guide to the Bible* in two volumes, published in 1967 and 1969 respectively, and that, while he appears to have done his best to use then-contemporary critical sources, he was not a Biblical scholar, as he candidly admits in the front matter. His work likely does not reflect absolute cutting-edge Biblical scholarship of the time, let alone could it treat developments of the forty years since its publication. With that in mind, I would still urge anyone in Asimov's target audience to turn to this book--I know of no resource that is both as comprehensive and as readable.

Asimov's chapters vary greatly in length, as do the books of the Bible. These two data series roughly correlate.

Despite its accessibility and Asimov's renowned clarity of expression, simply to due to its length this work is a bit of a beast and will demand discipline to undertake, if you plan to read it cover to cover as I did. While it's certainly usable as a reference guide, I think the direct approach yields great benefits; first of all, Asimov uses forward and (especially) backward references extensively. While in practically all cases, a page number is offered to help you jog your memory, you will have no memory to jog if you haven't already read that material (or are already pretty familiar with the entire Bible). Secondly, those portions of the Bible which document historical events are for the most part already arranged in chronological order (in the Christian canons). Asimov offers a little push in that direction for Apocryphal materials, covering 1 Esdras at the end of Nehemiah in the Old Testament and 2 Esdras after Jude in the New Testament. I will not further elaborate here why that makes sense, nor why the various books of Maccabees have little to do with each other. Asimov makes all of this clear.

In my comments, I propose a reading plan for this work to help you tackle it, if you're interested.

I experienced a sense of accomplishment in completing this book, and now feel well-prepared not just to explore the Bible itself, but to better understand religious allusions made by Christians and Jews, and, perhaps best of all, to be able to much more richly appreciate the works of William Blake and John Milton

(among many, many others). If you're at all like me, I hope you will undertake the same effort and find it similarly rewarding.

Josh says

this book does a great job of breaking the bible down, nearly book-for-book, and showing where the nascent christian religion fit in with history. However, this isn't to say that it is a christian book. Rather, it goes through the books and matches what the bible says with what is known from other, more reliable, sources (assyrian, chinese, roman records, etc). You might say it is a secular look at the books of the bible.

Todd says

This is a large tome, and certainly more a reference book than a novel. It can be quite a dry read at times, but in small doses, it is really fascinating. I keep it in my bathroom and randomly read entries a few hundred words at a time.

Curtiss says

The Good Doctor employs his usual insight and erudition to describe the secular history behind each of the books of the Bible and put them into the appropriate context; this single-volume edition covers both the Old & New Testaments.

Michael Coats says

A great book that helps to explain the historical context in which the events of the Bible play out. When my son and I read the Bible together, we read through this at the same time. Many otherwise confusing passages came clear, and we also learned of some details that are still debated by scholars and theologians. This is worth reading front to back, but is probably most useful as a reference; when questions come up regarding a specific chapter or verse, take the time to see what Asimov has to say about it!

Lorna Collins says

This is a wonderful reference text. Asimov compares the biblical accounts with other historical references of the time. Over the years, we have found it provides a different perspective to the events, often including a frame of reference.
