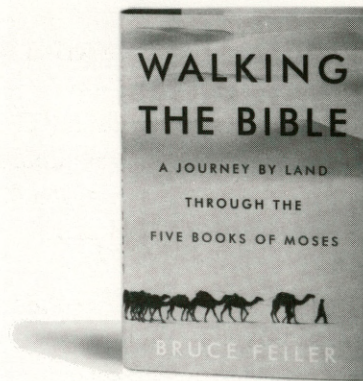


Walking—Sometimes Driving Really Fast—Through the Bible

Walking the Bible. By Bruce Feiler.
New York: William Morrow, 2001. 464 pages

Reviewed by Mike Mennard



I have always dreamed of touring the Holy Land. My dream started when I was a seven year old, when my parents took me to church for the first time. My Sabbath School teacher could make the stories of Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses seem like cherished family secrets. Maybe that's why I still have such an affinity for the five "Books of Moses."

Needless to say, now doesn't seem the ideal time for gallivanting about the Middle East. Fortunately, Bruce Feiler has written a marvelous book—part adventure story, part spiritual pilgrimage—that has allowed me to tour vicariously the very spots I would most like to see.

Growing up in a traditional Jewish home, Feiler had a foundation in the Hebrew Bible, but that foundation had ebbed into distant memory. Aware that his connection to the Bible—"just another dusty book on top of the TV"—was hardly a personal one, Feiler came up with the harebrained scheme to travel the path of the Bible's earliest stories.

His friends and colleagues thought he was crazy, and Feiler himself wondered whether his plan wasn't a tad ludicrous. Admittedly, the challenges were many and seemingly insurmountable. Locating with precision the sites that correspond with biblical stories was itself a formidable task, because scholars disagree about where some stories took place.

Most significantly, the region is lacerated with war, making the trek both unpredictable and dangerous.

In perhaps Feiler's greatest stroke of luck, he asked the renowned archaeologist Avner Goren to accompany him, and Goren agreed. Although all others laughed at Feiler's venture, Goren seemed at first intrigued, then enthusiastic. Together, Feiler (and his insatiable curiosity) and Goren (and his seemingly bottomless well of knowledge) make for a delightful pair—a kind of anti-quixotic duo. Their friendship takes a narrative that could bog down into dull travelogue and transforms it into an engaging dialogue, like a good "buddy movie."

Feiler and Goren begin their journey along the eastern-most stretch of Turkey, at the base of Mt. Ararat. Here, as at no other place, the flood story looms large and real. Some townsfolk claim to have seen the ancient boat, but they speak of it mysteriously, like a UFO citing. Although Feiler isn't so quick to believe them, he is, for

the first time, confronted with the idea that the Bible—unlike, say, the *Odyssey*—has its roots in historical sites. He has never been a believer in miraculous tales, such as the flood; however, he begins to question himself. This is the beginning of Feiler's own development and spiritual maturation. Like watching a flower with time-lapse photography, one can see Feiler's faith grow, from seedling to full-bloomed flower.

Simply getting to various biblical sites is half the adventure. In spite of the book's title, Feiler and Goren do little walking and a lot of driving—sometimes really fast driving—through the Holy Land. Moving back and forth across tense borders—into Palestine, back into Israel, into Syria, and so forth—Feiler and Goren shrewdly trade packs of cigarettes or money for easy passage. (As one might guess, the passage between borders is rarely easy.) Usually their approach works. (It's amazing how much a pack of cigarettes will buy!) When it doesn't work, the reader is as disappointed as Feiler, and one feels the frustration of a region in millennia-old turmoil.

Still, in spite of the obstacles, Feiler successfully takes us on a 10,000-mile romp through key

biblical sites, such as Shechem, Bethel, Egypt, the Red Sea, and Sinai. At each stop, Goren reads from the Bible and weaves in his own archaeological, geographical, and theological insights. With each insight, it becomes clear how much the terrain has shaped these stories, and how revisiting that terrain makes these old stories seem present and alive. In the dusty deserts of the Negev and the Sinai Peninsula, it's easy to see why water plays such a key role throughout the Bible. In the red dirt of the entire region, one is reminded of the marvelous pun: that God creates the *adam* (man) out of the *adamah* (red clay).

Meanwhile, story after story, adventure after adventure, Feiler

continues to garner faith, not merely in the validity of the stories, but also in the very existence of God. This is why I'm surprised at how universally the book has been received, remaining on the *New York Times* Best Seller List for several weeks. I found the book as entertaining as any novel. At the same time, Feiler's ongoing maturation and spiritual growth was for me as inspirational as most books at the local Christian bookstore.

Toward the book's end, after an amazing sequence of adventures, Feiler and Goren come at last to Mt. Nebo, the site of Moses' death. They climb to the plateau where Moses, unable to cross into the Promised Land, supposedly stood and surveyed the Jordan valley. It's

a sad ending to Moses's story, and Feiler himself feels a bit gloomy. But Goren, as always, helps put the moment into perspective. He reminds Feiler that in the end the last thing Moses saw was not the land, but God. And ultimately, this is how their quest should end—no longer a survey of land, but a glimpse of God.

I still dream about traveling the Holy Land. Feiler's book has neither replaced my dream nor lessened my desire to see firsthand the sites of these great stories, which have enveloped my own life. Rather, although he may have provided a temporary reprieve for my dream, he has paradoxically fueled its intensity.

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