

# THE BIBLE

The spectacular beauty of Wadi Rum in southern Jordan, which may represent part of the wilderness through which ancient Israelites wandered.

While filming *Walking the Bible*, host Bruce Feiler, right, was given unprecedented access to some of the world's most well-known landmarks.



Discussed: faith and learning, science and religion, uncommon characters, impact of living faith, biblical questions, value of archaeology, journey toward God, wilderness, larger meaning of Scripture

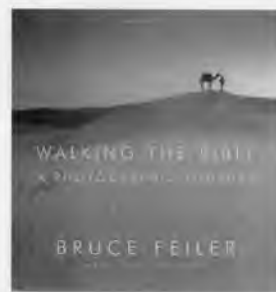
# Traveling Toward God

A review of the movie version of *Walking the Bible*.

By Douglas Clark

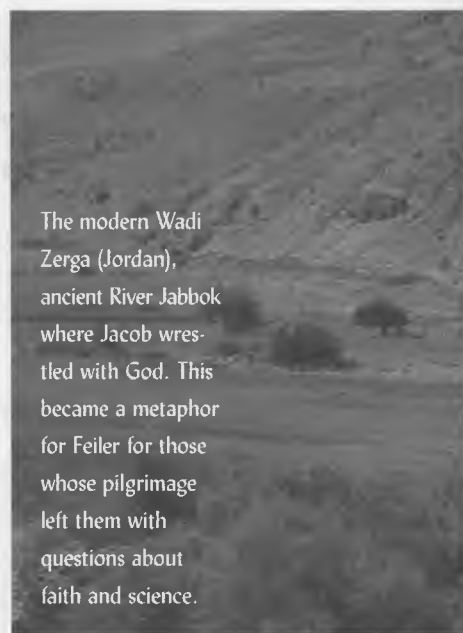


Which is better: the book or the movie? In the case of *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land through the Five Books of Moses*, by Bruce Feiler, both are very much worth the purchase price. Both print and digital versions impressively capture the angst and ecstasy of a man on a journey to the roots of his faith as they follow the same time-honored story line from “the beginning” in Eden—through human trauma and tragedy in the valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Palestine, past mountain-top visions of grandeur, all the way to the Promised Land.





A view of Mount Nebo in Jordan from the east. Here is where Moses viewed the Promised Land and Feiler camped out.



The modern Wadi Zerga (Jordan), ancient River Jabbok where Jacob wrestled with God. This became a metaphor for Feiler for those whose pilgrimage left them with questions about faith and science.

Raising the same questions of the Bible's backdrop and background—and of faith—both find a way to needle readers/viewers with seemingly imponderable dilemmas of life and belief, of faith and learning, of science and religion. And, in both, the goal is the same: to see what difference it might make to experience the land of the Bible's early stories for clues into meaning and relevance in the modern world.

What the book succeeds in accomplishing through engaging, reflective dialogue and narrative reporting of the journey, the film goes a step further to bring about: allowing viewers opportunities to visualize the Bible's landscape directly, even if not by visiting the sites in person. The power of profound written narrative to elicit mental templates of biblical scenes provides sufficient reason for publication of the book.

As I have personally felt since my first trip to the Middle East in 1973, traversing biblical landscapes, climbing storied mountains, visiting sacred sites, digging up ancient households, and experiencing the land firsthand—these make it impossible to read the Bible the same way ever again. If one can't afford the trip, a visual tour like this is the next best thing.

The film is spectacular, capturing effects, sounds, songs, and ambiance extremely well. I could almost have climbed into my television, given the stunning shots of bedouin hosts and their hospitality. Too bad there were no olfactory sensations so I could smell the tea! I found the cinematography appealing, the maps graphic and informative. The story was well-paced and for the most part well-conceived.

I have nothing but praise for the visual portrayal Bruce Feiler has created in the film version. Without hesitation, I could also easily feel myself walking the Bible.

Along with a cast of at times curious and uncommon characters, Feiler sets out on the improbable mission of visiting in order biblical sites connected with events recorded in Genesis through Deuteronomy, making sure to stay close to the land and its people. This is not a luxury tour with fifty-one other yawning, out-of-town pilgrims imprisoned behind the protective glass of a full-sized bus and five-star hotels.

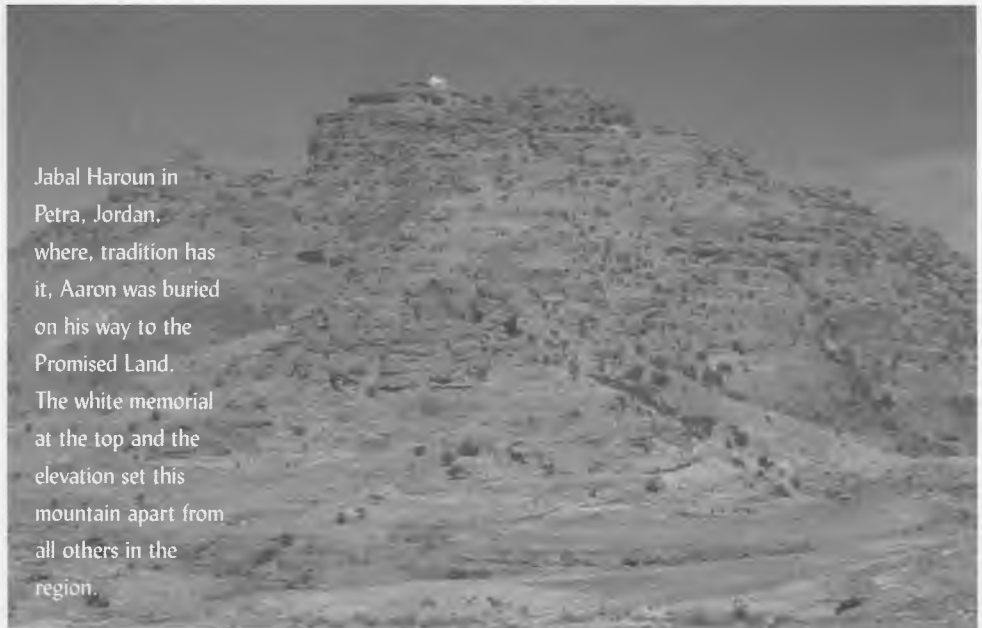
Engaging various companions in conversation along the way, Feiler moves from Mesopotamia—with its ties to stories of creation, deluge, disaster, and finally deliverance—through Abraham, to Egyptian and Sinai venues of a meager existence, indentured enslavement, and finally escape at the hand of Moses. Then he goes to wild, deserted expanses of sand and steppe, where pain and potential danger finally give way to visions of the Promised Land.

Often in the company of archaeologist Avner Goren, Feiler encountered, enjoyed the hospitality of, learned from, and came to appreciate dozens of people along the way. These included local government (un)officials, other archaeologists, bedouin hosts, farmers, merchants, monks, and many other kinds of interlocutors. People from all walks of life came into the service of Feiler's quest to traverse the lands of the Bible in search of the truth.

The journey itself is multilayered, consisting of overlapping levels of interest and concern, dictated by



Jabal Haroun in Petra, Jordan, where, tradition has it, Aaron was buried on his way to the Promised Land. The white memorial at the top and the elevation set this mountain apart from all others in the region.



the topography of the land but defined by its impact on living faith. Mountains predominate and carry promise—Ararat, Moriah, Sinai, Jabal Haroun, and Mount Nebo; water threatens and rescues—rivers of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Red Sea; and deserts are both hostile and hospitable.

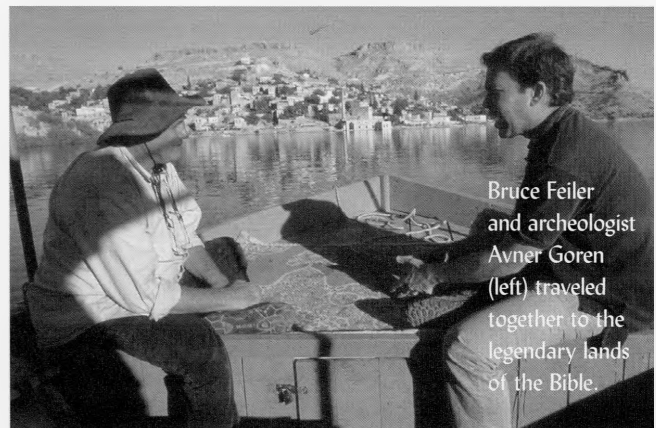
Just as Feiler travels the landscape of the Bible, he also journeys through a minefield of biblical questions about historicity, scientific inquiry and its results, and the value of archaeology. Even more central to the film—as to the book—this is a journey toward God, a path from initial naïveté through severe challenges to uninformed faith, to a settled, apparently satisfying coming-to-terms with what he discovers along the way.

Encountered en route is a series of pressing problems, fraught with danger and no less daunting than the Israelites' bondage in Egypt or the Red Sea stretching out before Moses. Is Feiler to trust the Bible? Can he confidently lay claim to the Bible's historical value? What happens when various conclusions deriving from archaeological or other scientifically driven endeavors run counter to the biblical story? What then?

Without disparaging the perspectives of his colleagues and conversation partners, he nevertheless finds himself grappling with observations made in honesty and integrity by historians and archaeologists that appear to disagree with the Bible, even if local lore may not. How to manage the conflicts and resolve them? How to square varied accounts of the Flood, the Exodus, the location of the Red Sea (five candidates), Mount Sinai (twenty-two options), and the Abraham story?

As recorded in the book, midway through the journey Feiler finds himself very much in the wilderness: "It's as if the act of mapping the land was forcing me to remap my own internal geography, suddenly taking into account a broader range of feelings than I had ever previously explored—deeper canyons of confidence, perhaps, but also wider expanses of uncertainty and higher elevations of need" (223).

What, then, saves Feiler from his ambivalence, from the complex discoveries he has made wandering the same route as our biblical forebears? While taking seriously what he learns and at the same time attempting to retain some type of faith in the Bible, he grants us access to the inner process of transformation taking place with-



Bruce Feiler and archeologist Avner Goren (left) traveled together to the legendary lands of the Bible.

in his mind throughout the trip. Without doubt, the journey has been worth the effort, claiming for him a new and vital respect for the Bible because of it. Citing Goren, "The way to keep a trail alive is to walk in it."

In the end, Feiler opts for the larger meaning of Scripture rather than focusing on the factuality of all the details. The land was not the destination after all; the real destination was God. The journey began with scientific, historical, and archaeological questions, but it became much more a spiritual pilgrimage. At the end of the day, he had indeed reached a destination, Israel, the place where, in his words, one strives with God.

For Feiler, the Bible is alive, made more so by his travels through the geography of its stories. It spoke not only to the ancients to whom it was originally delivered, but continues to speak to countless generations, including our own, about the reality of God. The Bible invites us to relive its events, to experience deliverance anew each time the story is read or reenacted through annual rituals.

As Feiler states in the book, "We should enter the story ourselves, reimagine ourselves in bondage, and reconsider the feelings of awe, fear, apprehension, and expectation we have upon being released by a god we're just seeing—and feeling—for the first time" (184).

Will Feiler's devotional, even somewhat mystical, response to the dissonance he has experienced walking the Bible prove satisfying? The answer will depend in part on his audience. Will he satisfy historians who attempt to ask the hard questions about what really happened? Perhaps, but mixing what can be demonstrated historically with uncritically analyzed local lore would present a challenge for this group.

What about archaeologists who seek to uncover whatever is buried and let it speak for itself? Maybe, but the goal of using archaeology to chase down questions with theological overtones will not fly, as Feiler himself recognizes. What about the biblical scholars who investigate literary style, sources, structure, and finesse? Could be, as long as people don't try to squeeze the Bible into something it is not, something inerrant and verbally inspired.


What about his appeal to people like me, who take the Bible seriously as God's inspired word, who have been trained in and have practiced for three decades biblical studies and the science of archaeology in a collegiate setting and who admit to having a right side to their brains, even a devotional bent? Is this book/film satisfying to me?

Feiler credits me with a devotional streak in the book. This comes in answer to his own question about which version of God he should accept, "The creator God of Genesis, the destroyer God of Numbers, the Christian God of St. Catherine's, the Muslim God of Jebel Haroun, the deeply personal God that Doug Clark found on Mount Nebo" (419).

Not everyone will be drawn to Bruce Feiler's travels through the land of the Pentateuch, written or visual. Not everyone will capture or be captured by the nuances of a maturing faith seeking expression in the face of more and more information about the Bible and its background, some of it positive and affirming, some challenging. But for anyone who enjoys the journey, who is willing to be surprised, who feels comfortable learning more and believing in new ways, this is a must-see movie!

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Archeologist Douglas Clark has served as executive director of the American Schools of Oriental Research.



The shadow of  
Mount Sinai  
cast in the early  
morning on  
neighboring  
mountains to  
the west.