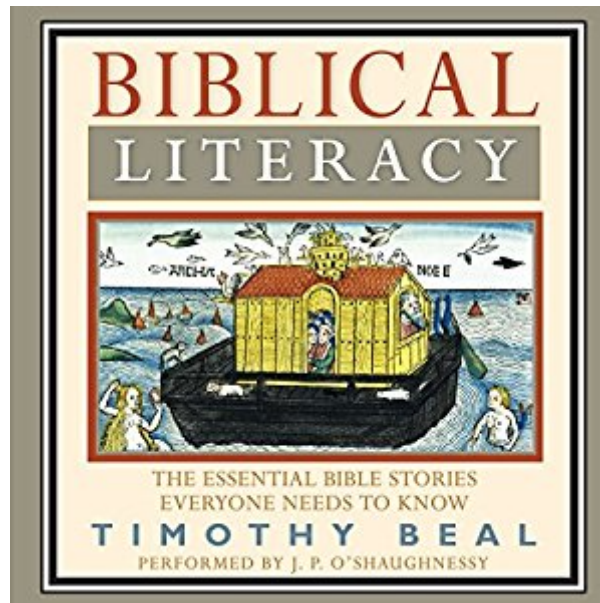




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# Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs To Know



## Synopsis

Everything You Need to Know About the Bible's Most Important Stories.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

We used this book with an adult study group that has been using "Reading Between The Lines," published by the Educational Center ([...]). RBTL follows the Revised Common Lectionary, and in those churches that use the lectionary, people often have little grasp on the broader context of the readings or of the other stories that play a significant role in the biblical story. Timothy Beal's book provided a marvelous survey of essential Bible stories (his criteria for "essential" are more oriented toward the stories' impact on Western culture, art, and literature than on theological or doctrinal issues). Throughout, he invites the reader to explore, to question, and to ponder, asking probing questions that encourage reading the texts at a deeper level. Sprinkled throughout are quotes and references ranging from Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments" to Donald Trump's hair to Metallica and Clint Eastwood's "Pale Rider." "The Bible is far from culturally irrelevant," Beal writes, "Indeed, I would argue that you can't be culturally literate without being at least basically familiar with biblical literature." Hence, this book. Beal does not assume the reader already knows the Bible, and offers helpful introductions to each section, along with "sidebars" touching on topics like how the Jewish and Christian Bibles are similar, but different, the role of Prophets, the nature of biblical poetry, how to read a parable, or symbolism in Revelation. Add to this a list of familiar biblical phrases and images, a glossary of biblical words and suggestions for further reading, "Biblical Literacy" is a valuable resource for anyone, no matter how much or how little you may know about

the Bible.

If you ever decide that you need to educate yourself about the Bible, but do not have the time to read the whole thing, this is the book for you. Timothy Beal has selected 87 Bible stories (48 Old Testament, 39 New Testament) and presented them here in manageable bites. All the famous stories are here (the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah's flood, the nativity of Jesus, the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son stories, and death and resurrection of Jesus) as well as stories, maybe not as famous, but necessary for "biblical literacy" (Hagar and Ishmael, wrestling Jacob, Jephthah's Daughter, Jeremiah's Jeremiad, Rabbi Jesus, All Things in Common, A Thorn in the Flesh). Beal chooses these stories because he believes that "Biblical literacy is a prerequisite for cultural literacy" (p. XV) and goes on to provide copious examples, both in his introduction and in the text, of the role of Bible stories and Bible characters in shaping our culture. About two years ago, I read Beal's "The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book," which was published in 2011. That book was most enlightening about the process by which the contents of today's Bible were collected, revised, translated, and retranslated, approved by orthodox clerics, and entered into the Jewish and Christian canon of beliefs over a period of thousands of years. Beal was able to make sense of all that history. "Biblical Literacy" is not an attempt to understand the history of these stories. It simply takes the stories as they are, presents a little introduction to each, and then lets the Bible verses themselves do the storytelling. (Beal uses the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.) With many of the stories, there is a sidebar that presents another way of looking at the story---maybe an allusion from a Charlotte Bronte novel (p. 53) or an Indigo Girls song lyric (p. 67). Sometimes a sidebar presents another telling of the story from a different book of the Bible. After presenting the Sermon on the Mount from the gospel of Matthew, Beal provides a sidebar asking us to compare this with the Sermon on the Plain in the gospel of Luke (pp. 204-5). All of this deepens our understanding of the Bible and enables us to see how words and ideas from the Bible are woven into our culture and throws new light onto old stories. Sprinkled throughout the book there are ten boxed elements that provide a little historical or theological background to the Bible texts. "A Quick History Lesson" (pp. 78-9) provides a quick overview of the history of ancient Israel. "How to Read a Parable" (p. 207) warns us against trying to reduce each parable of Jesus to a single meaning. Beal encourages us to look for the two parts of the metaphor contained in the parable. He prods us with questions we might ask ourselves about the parable. "Signature Paul?" (p. 260) informs us that some of Paul's epistles were not even written by him. We get these little theology lessons in small bits at strategic points throughout the book, and they enrich our

understanding of the Bible. This is not a book that needs to be read straight through from beginning to end. It might better be thought of as a reference book (although I could not resist reading it straight through). Place it on the shelf next to your Bible and reach for it when you hear or read some mention of Jacob's Ladder, Jonah in the Whale, or Doubting Thomas. Making Biblical Literacy even more handy as a reference are the "Extras" in the back of the book: Familiar Biblical Phrases and Images ("Am I my brother's keeper," "Blind leading the blind," "Eye for an eye," and so on) and Glossary of Biblical Key Words (from Aaron to Zipporah). Suggestions for Further Reading and an index fill out the back matter.

Many books which examine the essential stories of the Bible fail to prove why these stories are significant. They provide a summary of the story, but don't elaborate on commentary. As a teacher who has a Biblical Literacy unit in my class, this was less than ideal. I was thrilled to discover this book because it not only clarifies some of the most important stories in the Bible, but it also shows how these stories impacted literature, politics, and pop culture. It is a great read for anyone hoping to have a better understanding of the Bible (with or without any faith background). It is easy to read and accessible and offers a great explanation as to why it is so important for everyone to understand the Bible. Very useful resource; I highly recommend it!

We employ this text in a Sunday School "Intro to the Bible" class and have found it very useful for those not deeply familiar with the Bible as a whole. Beal selects key parts to orient students to the over-all picture. We often add readings which he has chosen to leave out and that works well for us. It's really easy to get our students to prepare for class by reading about ten pages per session. They typically come to class with personal observations, questions, and connections so participation is guaranteed. We have both high school-aged kids and adults in our class and have found the used books a great buy because we encourage marking key points/questions. By using this approach, we can get through the selected Bible topics in nine months. While we don't always agree with the author's viewpoint, Beal's book is a good tool for our class.

This book was recommended to me as something that would give overviews with parallels to current times. This is so easy to read and ponder and is broken down so that you can read it, put it down and pick it up later and read another section. I recommended this book to a friend who is teaching his adult Sunday School Class and he found it very helpful. Very easy to understand. Well written.

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