


MARTY SOLOMON

CREATOR OF *THE BEMA* PODCAST

A GUIDE FOR THE WOUNDED,  
WARY & LONGING FOR MORE



ASKING  
BETTER  
QUESTIONS  
OF THE  
BIBLE

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I've been waiting for this book to be written for a long time. In *Asking Better Questions of the Bible*, Marty Solomon gives us a treasure map to uncover riches in the Bible by taking the reader back to the Hebraic context of the ancient world. You'll never read the Bible the same way after going through this book.

ROBBY GALLATY, pastor of Long Hollow Church and author of *The Forgotten Jesus* and *Growing Up*

This book is, above all else, an invitation. It's an invitation to bring our whole selves to our reading of Scripture, confident that doing so will lead us into a deeper level of meaning and understanding. Solomon asks us to join him on a journey away from easy answers and toward a richer encounter not only with the biblical text itself but, more importantly, with the God who beckons us to draw near. For anyone committed to discipleship, this is an invitation to enthusiastically accept.

JENNIFER ROSNER, affiliate assistant professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Finding Messiah*

Marty helps us see that asking questions about the Bible shouldn't make us nervous; instead, it can usher us into new possibilities in our relationship with God and his Word. By diving deep in fresh and engaging ways, this book will help you experience the goodness of God in what's revealed in Scripture—and help you fall in love with Jesus for the first time . . . again.

J.R. BRIGGS, founder of Kairos Partnerships and author of *The Sacred Overlap*

*Asking Better Questions of the Bible* is for everyone who loves the Bible—or who *wants* to love the Bible but has been wounded by those using it as a weapon. With a writing voice as knowledgeable as a seminary prof and as accessible as a close friend, Marty Solomon provides the tools you need to find the God of goodness and love in these ancient pages. Whether this is your first or fiftieth time looking for God in the Bible, I urge you to pick up a copy of this book and find hope, life, and the freedom to imagine better questions.

CATHERINE McNIEL, author of *Fearing Bravely*

If you find the bestselling book of all time—the Bible—irrelevant, inaccurate, or insignificant, you're not alone, but you may want to reconsider. Marty's latest offers both a nuanced and a faithful way to reimagine the text as both sacred and transformational. Read this book for tools and insights that will help you reclaim the bestselling book of all time.

AJ SHERRILL, Anglican priest and author of *Being with God*

This book is an invitation to a deeper truth and a better approach to applying it. There is so much in this book for small groups, discipling one-on-one, or even teaching from the stage. All followers of Jesus will be inspired to examine how we talk about what we talk about.

AARON COUCH, MA, pastor at Southeast Christian Church

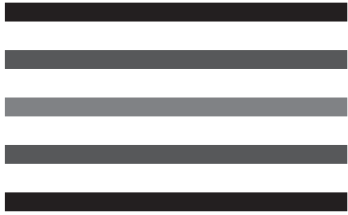
Well, I'll be . . . Marty did it. He *actually* wrote a balanced, inviting, captivating book about the Bible. It is lively but not cheap. It is rigorous but not punishing. It is faithful but not fideistic. This book deepens the faith-giving approach to the Bible that so many of us have found in *The BEMA Podcast*. And, thank God, it's readable!

PETER HARTWIG, MDIV, lecturer at WTC Theology

In *Asking Better Questions of the Bible*, Marty Solomon offers wonderful examples and resources for doing precisely what the title suggests while inviting the reader to engage the Hebrew context and the distinctions between Eastern and Western thought. This alone is worth the price of the book and is desperately needed in modern biblical interpretation. *Asking Better Questions of the Bible* is a gem for those desiring to be shaped by the Text as opposed to simply deconstructing it. It offers a refined set of tools for a deepening relationship with the Bible and the God it reveals.

BRIAN HARDIN, visionary and voice of the Daily Audio Bible





A GUIDE FOR THE WOUNDED,  
WARY & LONGING FOR MORE



# ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS OF THE BIBLE

MARTY SOLOMON



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*This is dedicated to Graham and Raylene Solomon.*

*To Mom, for teaching me the two most  
important things in all the cosmos.*

*To Dad.*

*I am so unbelievably proud of you.*

*And I'm proud to be your son.*





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CHAPTER 1

# SEEING THE TEXT IN CONTEXT

*The Case for Inspiration*

I am deeply convicted that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

For those familiar with my work, that may seem like a strange opening line for this book. I'm a teacher who passionately encourages people to think critically and ask big questions. I believe we should be free to doubt and let those doubts carry us into deeper wonder and curiosity. Our doubts shouldn't scare us. But neither should we embrace them as a place to settle, a permanent state of being. Doubts are invitations, opportunities to continue the journey of discovery.

That's why I try to cultivate a kind of learning space, a place where doubts are welcome and find a voice. It's why

I talk about overlooked historical context or the cultural assumptions that could be driving the biblical conversation. I love to examine the theories put forward by academic experts who have given their lives to studying these details. Questions invigorate my study.

Many of these experts probably wouldn't share my commitment to the Scripture's inspiration. The world of textual criticism can be a cold, analytical place. But here is what I know: The discoveries and proposals I have found make the Scriptures come alive and burst with color. As we search through the data, pondering the conclusions (and doubts) of others, considering things that may seem off-limits at first—that practice, far from driving us from “the truth,” further reinforces the power and beauty of the Text (what I often call the Bible). We become people who take God's Word more seriously when we think through and grapple with the implications of these ideas.

I know that, for many, this journey is laden with insecurity and causes us to wonder whether we are questioning too much. But God has always honored and respected those who refuse to let go. Even when the wrestling results in a limp (recall Jacob the Wrestler of Genesis), it also brings about a new identity that carries us—and generations after us—through the story with more intimacy and vibrancy in our faithfulness. Our wrestling can make us more convinced, not less, of the Bible's inspiration.

But too often in the church, we have turned the rich reality of inspiration into a means of settling—for easy answers,

pseudosecurity, self-assurance, or false resolution. When I was growing up, the Word was used too quickly and defensively.

I understand why. The entire human experience is one long battle with fear and insecurity. One of the things we desire more than anything else is to *know*—to sense that we have arrived, that at least for a moment we can take a deep breath and just relax. As Brené Brown points out, research shows that our brains reward themselves for completing a story loop.<sup>1</sup> In other words, when we bring a plot or a conflict to resolution, our brains get a bit of a dopamine boost. This is part of what it means to be human, and compassionately understanding that about ourselves is a beautiful thing.

But we also ought to note the dangers that lie in this reality. Our biological and psychological processes are wired to look for those resolutions, whether they are real or not. There's a reward for finding them, but some of the treasures are fool's gold.

When it comes to our beliefs about God and faith—the things that are so foundational to who we are—we begin to feel anxious at the gravity of our questions. We move quickly toward the safety and allure of resolution. If we question the bedrock to which we have anchored our identity and our eternity, we can easily feel like we are falling. The quicker we can reconstruct that foundation, the more secure we feel.

And so we stop too soon. We take the off-ramp, settling for something just short of the real and liberating payoff. Like the Israelites at the bitter well of Marah, we set up shop and build our theologies rather than pushing ahead and finding

Elim—a beautiful place with twelve wells and seventy palm trees—just around the corner (see Exodus 15:22-27).

I know because I've been there. It's where I found myself as a young Bible college student and then as a pastor. Quick explanations. Confident declarations. Slick and polished theology.

But the fact of the matter was that I had seen too much. The very constructs that pushed me toward easy answers also required me to know the Scriptures—and I'd spent too much time in the Bible for those answers and explanations to satisfy. I didn't say it out loud, but I had so many questions and doubts.

I have spent so much time deconstructing my experience as a child raised in Christian subculture. But on this point, I need to express some gratitude to my fundamentalist evangelical parents—because that was the context where I first became convinced of the importance of two things: Jesus and the Bible.

I'm not sure where you're at as you read these pages, but if you're anything like me, and anything like the people who join me on *The BEMA Podcast*, you might be feeling a little shaky right about now. You want to love Jesus. You want to trust the Bible. But it may be that there's too much muddy water under that evangelical bridge for you to have much confidence in me when I say both are important for this journey.

That's okay. I've walked this road long enough to know

that none of us have it settled or figured out at the beginning. This matter of wrestling with God is one of the most meaningful journeys that you and I will ever embark upon. The tension can be trusted, and the content can be tested. This trust can seem counterintuitive, but when we press into the journey, we usually end up meeting the Person who holds all things together, including each of us and our frazzled faith. This Person is compassion and love incarnate and remains faithful even when we feel faithless, and he tends to find us along the way.

When I think about the relationships that matter the most to me—like the one I have with my wife or the ones with my children or my best friends—part of what makes these relationships what they are is the fact that we have been through trials together. Our relationships have been tested, but that journey has only drawn us closer. Not all relationships are like this; some don't survive the fire. But the ones that matter do—because we've fought for each other.

Nobody will fight for us more zealously, with more commitment and perseverance, with more forgiveness and compassion and love, than the One we are examining now. I can state this with such clarity and confidence because I know him. He has never left me or forsaken me. He has been a safe place for every twisted emotion and scary hurt. He has been the only One able to transform and redeem the ugliest parts of me and of the world that you and I live in.

And he has never scoffed at a single question of mine.



## **A WORD ABOUT JESUS**

This book will be an entire discussion about the Bible: how important it is and how to read it better. But there's a crucial pit stop to make, as much for myself as for you, before we get started. We do not read the Bible in a vacuum, or in isolation, as a simple mental exercise. We do not start with knowledge for knowledge's sake. We seek to engage the Bible more faithfully because of its ability to connect us with the One who can transform all things.

I love the Bible, but the Bible is not the focus of my affection. It is not the object of my worship. The people of God worship God, not the Bible. We follow a person—his name is Jesus—whom we are to adore, imitate, submit to, and follow to the ends of the earth.

Throughout my journey of faith, I have been blessed with incredible mentors who kept talking about the person of Jesus and what he was up to. They kept helping me connect the dots of who Jesus is personally and not just what the Bible said as a head exercise. Most of them have been people who are deeply committed to prayer. They taught me how to pray and how to build a relationship with this mysterious Christ.

But prayer never came easily for me. To this day, it's not my native posture—I've never quite been able to get comfortable in that space. But because these mentors insisted on the importance of prayer, silence, solitude, listening, and fasting, I stuck with it. And these practices changed my

life—because in the silence, the listening, and the intentional space for conversation, the person of Jesus became quite real to me.

Then, later in my journey, God supplied me with mentors who had a passion for the Text—and I found the expression of my faith I had been looking for all my life. Suddenly I felt like I was speaking in my native tongue. Much as prayer and contemplative practices filled the spiritual lives of my earlier mentors, the study of the Text deepened me spiritually.

I'm glad I found the first mentors first. I had been introduced not just to academic study and ideas about a special book—I had been introduced to the person of Jesus. To this day, I remain committed to those contemplative practices because they keep me tethered to a concrete relationship, not just abstract ideas—something that, for me, needs to precede the study and connects that study to the person of Christ.

I often tell my students to remember that this whole thing is about Jesus. Just Jesus.

Not “Jesus, and . . .”

Not “Jesus, as long as . . .”

Not “Jesus, but . . .”

*Just Jesus.*

We have to remember that all our study facilitates the bigger and better thing: our connection to the resurrected Christ. So before we start talking about the Text and the details and the literary nuances and the context and the Jewish methods, let us remember that Jesus is the guide, the destination, and the hiking partner for this adventure.

## A WORD ABOUT THE BIBLE

While much about the Christian subculture I grew up in has proven to be built on shaky ground, they got this right: The Bible is necessary, valuable, and reliable for the life of faith. I knew this book was rock solid and could be trusted in its content.

The seed of this belief was what sprouted later in life when my questions wouldn't leave me alone. As I began to explore these questions with other committed believers, they would get increasingly agitated. "You don't need to ask that," they would insist. "Just trust the Bible."

But that was the thing—I *did* trust the Bible. This very trust gave me the confidence to ask questions. I suppose some folks ask questions from a place of disbelief. They don't think the Bible can be trusted, and their questions are aimed at affirming their assumptions. We often believe all doubts come from this place.

But some doubts—maybe even most of them—come from a place of confidence. Whether it's confidence in God or in the Bible, these questions are a weird mixture of assurance and humility. We don't assume that the Bible is wrong, but that it is right and we simply aren't seeing, haven't considered, or haven't discovered the whole picture. The humility of these questions sees the bigness of God, the bigness of truth, the bigness of this inspired story that's been passed down through the ages—and assumes there is so, so much more.

Of all the things I grew to distrust from my upbringing,

neither Jesus nor the Bible was ever among them. And I was ready to double down on my conviction about these things. What confused me was why most of the faithful people around me, who talked with such a tone of confidence, didn't want to do the same. It seemed like all the boisterous talk about trusting the Bible was just a façade that kept us from actually trusting the Bible.

Within the evangelical world in which I was raised, it's fashionable for people to claim they have a "high view of Scripture." *The Bible says so, and that settles it!* is a common mantra. These people believe that a simple, straightforward reading of the Bible is the most faithful way to engage with God's Word.

The "liberals," I was told (with a definite sense of disgust and disdain), were people who didn't believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. Their interest in cultural and historical context and anything else beyond a plain reading of the Text meant that they had a very "low" view of Scripture—and (obviously) of God and all things that are holy.

There was some truth to this. Many "liberal" scholars don't hold to the Bible's inspiration and authority; they treat it as any other piece of literature. As I've said before, I am indebted to the early lessons from the fundamentalist subculture to "simply read the Bible" and try to do what it seems to be saying.

But I couldn't shake the thought that a "simply read the Bible" approach seemed to be missing some key questions that would lead, in fact, to a more faithful engagement with the Bible. What about translations and cultural context? And

which translation? Was the Bible written to me or to historical audiences? And how does this impact the inspired meaning of the Text? When we don't consider these things, don't we risk presuming that *we* are the ultimate authority—that our individual perspectives and postures are what lend the Scripture its true meaning? And isn't it readily apparent that our perspectives are wildly different from the ones the Bible assumes?

"Simply reading the Bible," it seemed, was just an easy way out. If we clung to that, we could brush off the need to ask penetrating questions about whether we are reading the Bible correctly.

And reading the Bible correctly is of immeasurable importance. The evangelical tradition hangs its worldview and behavior on what the Text is telling us. Getting the interpretation right is of utmost significance to those with a high view of Scripture.

Understanding what the Bible is saying equips us to be devoted to what it teaches us. So I realized that I needed to answer some of these better questions. And to do that, I needed to create a space where these two worlds—of devoted commitment to the Bible and of academic scholarship—overlapped, like a Venn diagram.

Isn't that what we want? "No," I was told. "Those ivory-tower academics are all just liberals trying to puff themselves up with knowledge. We figured this all out a while ago. Just trust the system." There were two problems with this. First, the characterization of academia was lazy and blatantly untrue. Second, every system we had trusted in the past had gotten

things wrong—sometimes critically wrong. The very movements and traditions we were in started because of fallacies. It was inevitable that we would get things wrong as well.

And we should want to know what those things are—because we have a high view of Scripture.

Or do we?

Brian McLaren (who I had been told was a “liberal” who didn’t love the Bible the right way) advocated for an even higher view of Scripture: one that doesn’t settle for a simple reading of the Text but is instead so committed to the authority of the Bible that it sees the need to study the original languages and listen to historians and archaeologists about the context of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> All this is vital if we want to learn what the Bible is actually trying to say, not just what we *think* it is saying or what we have *wanted* it to say for centuries in our own context.

McLaren’s words gave me language for my own journey. I was not looking to get rid of a high view of Scripture—but I was finding that this “high view of Scripture” *wasn’t high enough*. It was, at least at times, a high view of doctrine, of dogma, and of tradition. But we were not actually committed to having a high view of Scripture itself.

My desire for a higher view of Scripture and its Author became the reason for my study.

## LITERARY TOURISTS

I have a friend who likes to say, “When we ask questions the Bible isn’t asking, we always get the wrong answers.” Really?

Always? We *always* get the wrong answers? Yes. This doesn't mean that the answers we may find aren't good or helpful, or even accurate in some way. But *on a hermeneutical level*, when it comes to biblical interpretation, if you ask questions the Bible isn't asking, then you are asking the wrong questions. And if you're asking the wrong questions, then you are getting the wrong answers as a work of exegesis.

That's why we're embarking on this quest: to have a better understanding of what the Bible is saying or not saying; this growing understanding helps us deepen our relationship with the God of the Bible. Our goal is to understand, to the best of our ability, the inspired messages of the Text, whether they are stories, songs, genealogies, poems, letters, or visions.

Here's where I want us to start: from the assumption that the inspired meaning of the Text lies in the original conversation between author and audience. Not every hermeneutic and approach assumes this, but it makes the most logical sense to me. Some refer to this understanding as "communicative intent." Another way I've heard this expressed is "authorial intent." What this means is that we let our journey be guided by these questions:

- What did the author mean when they wrote it?
- What did the audience understand when they heard it?
- What is the inspired conversation (in the Text) trying to communicate to us?

If we do our best to understand this conversation, then we are getting closer to the inspired conversation contained in the Text. The problem is the obstacle course that lies between us and the original conversation. We are undoubtedly familiar with some of these obstacles, but others may be foreign.

- **Language.** One of the most obvious obstacles is that of translation and language. People often ask me which translation is “the best” or “the most accurate,” but these labels are misnomers. There are always ideas, concepts, and nuances that cannot be translated from one language to another. This makes the work of translation unbelievably complex.
- **Time.** Simply put, a lot changes over the course of two or three thousand years. The assumptions being made back then are radically different from our assumptions now—let alone all the details we’ve simply lost without realizing it.
- **Culture.** Cultural assumptions have radically changed in our own context over the last few centuries. Imagine how much more that is true for a different culture on a different continent in a different millennium.
- **Literary tools.** We have certain ways of writing in our modern languages. Beyond things like figures of speech and other types of expressions, we have our own familiarities with rhyme and meter. We have emojis and



social-media platforms. Most of us pick up on these things in our culture. In the United States, for example, we generally understand the differences between a tweet, a blog post, and an article in the *Wall Street Journal*. We understand the objectives of a newspaper as it compares to an academic journal, a documentary film, or a TikTok video. In the same way, the ancient world of the Bible had a toolbox full of literary devices and approaches that all functioned in unique ways. These are likely the most overlooked and unknown pieces of the interpretive puzzle for the average Bible student.

- **Ever-evolving religious landscape.** The Bible (yes, even the New Testament) was written by Jews into a Jewish context out of different places in Jewish history. But Judaism, just like Christianity or any other faith group, is not an abstract monolith. Judaism evolved throughout history, and Jews grew in their own religious observance and corporate consciousness. The conversations happening during the Exodus were not the conversations happening during the monarchy, which were different than the conversations happening in Persia, which led to the conversations that shaped the rabbinic period—the backdrop of the Gospels and the New Testament letters. Once considered, this observation is obvious, yet the nonacademic Bible teacher rarely explores this reality in depth when engaging in biblical interpretation.

What this means is that we are what Dr. Gary Burge calls “literary tourists”:

We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide.<sup>3</sup>

Too often we come to the Bible without an awareness of our tourism. We think the Bible was written to us, about our current experiences and struggles. We expect it to speak to us directly and in our language. We assume the Bible is assuming the same things we are. We forget Philippians was written by a first-century Jewish rabbi to a small band of believers in a Roman colony who were quite unpopular and worried about their leader, who was sitting in prison. We read about doing all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13), and we convince ourselves that, in fact, we will get that new job as we stick our résumé in the mail.

And while there may be relevant modern application in those events, Paul was not sending a timeless pep talk into the vacuum of history. Paul was writing a very specific message with a specific intended meaning to a specific audience. Remembering that we are not the subject, but literary tourists, is simply good biblical hermeneutics. And it doesn't require a seminary degree to know this and practice this when you read the Bible.

*Realizing and accepting our place as literary tourists is a*

*significant part of the journey toward a more faithful engagement with Scripture.* We'll find that maintaining this awareness is uncommon and requires some discipline, but it is like anything else—something that can be learned. The confident humility of literary tourism can become the default posture of any student of the Text. We assume there is an endless number of things we are unaware of. Our questions provide the opportunity to dive into discovery and come away with a better awareness of a powerful, inspired conversation happening in the pages of our Bibles.

I have spent my life doubling down on just how good I believe the Bible is, and I've found some amazing tour guides along the way. What they've shown me is that my confidence in the goodness of Scripture was well placed. I believe now more than ever that Jesus was bigger and better than any person ever to live. I believe now more than ever that the Bible is a book unlike any book ever written—inspired and powerful, living and active. And I believe now more than ever that both of those things invite us to lean in and dig deeper.

As I've gone on this journey, I have found, over and over, that my questions and my doubts, rooted in confidence, are actually doorways to deeper discovery and wonder. My faith is more vibrant, and God continues to get bigger and bigger every day.

My invitation is a hopeful one: that you might believe this too. As we move forward into this book, leaning into the exploration of a dynamic and deeper understanding of

Scripture, I pray you will find the same affirmation that I did—from both the scholarship of others and the person of Jesus.

And wherever you come to the Text from—confidence or shaky ground—I can promise you this: When you start asking better questions, you’ll find better answers.

### **RESOURCES REFERENCED**

*Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown

*Rising Strong* by Brené Brown

*A New Kind of Christian* by Brian D. McLaren

*Interpreting the Gospel of John* by Dr. Gary Burge

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart