

POCKET GUIDE — TO THE — BIBLE

A LITTLE
BOOK
ABOUT
THE
BIG BOOK



JASON BOYETT

Author of POCKET GUIDE TO THE AFTERLIFE

“Informative, thoughtful, humorous in all the right places; and best of all, it’s smartly written!”

—**CHRIS YAMBAR**, Bart Simpson Comics,
Mr. Beat creator

“I usually don’t laugh out loud when I read the Bible—or even stuff about the Bible—but Jason Boyett had me laughing all the way through this book. Laughs aside, the *Pocket Guide* is well researched and documented, instructive and insightful.”

—**DEAN NELSON**, co-author of *The Power of Serving Others* and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego

“Jason Boyett dips the King James into a cultural vat of theological salsa. One bite and you know this ain’t your grandpa’s Bible.”

—**TERRY ESAU**, author of *Surprise Me*

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—**MATTHEW PAUL TURNER**, speaker and author
of *The Christian Culture Survival Guide* and *Mind
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my head with a grin and a healthy appetite
for more. This new book exceeded my
expectations. Reading it is like staying up
late with that old friend from seminary. He
just won’t shut up, and you’re not about to
ask him to, ’cause you’re loving every second
of it.”

—**ANDREW OSENGA**, singer/songwriter with
Caedmon’s Call

“A true sign of brilliance is the ability
to explain the complex and convoluted
simply. Jason Boyett has done that in
Pocket Guide to the Bible. His clever and
conversational style makes it an enjoyable
as well as intriguing read.”

—**RUSSELL RATHBUN**, author of *Post-Rapture Radio*

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the Word. At least, that's what some people call it. Others know it as the Good Book, the Holy Scriptures, or the Law and the Prophets. But to most of us? It's the Bible.

The thing came together a couple millennia ago and covers a few thousand years of human history. Readers of the Bible occasionally dispute its authorship. Some people think the book was written by God himself, whispering in the ears of a few dozen holy scribes way back in the Middle East. Others think those who wrote it were decent guys, perhaps more attuned to God than most, who got

Something like 168,000 new Bibles are sold, given away, or otherwise distributed every day.

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the Creator's point across despite subjecting the text to their own personal whims and limitations and primitive perspectives. And some people think the authors were all just a bunch of delusional wack-jobs out to justify their own misguided beliefs.

But don't let the controversy keep you from enjoying the Bible, because there's good stuff in there. Just about everyone can find something of benefit.

Steadfast believers *love* the Bible, even though right in the middle of it—in Psalms, which a lot of people cite as among their favorite books of the Bible—the authors repeatedly call into question God's faithfulness. And his presence. Even his existence.¹ Nonbelievers

“I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this book.”

—Abraham Lincoln
(1809–1865)

and skeptics enjoy the Bible too because this collection of ancient documents packs a variety of literary styles, influential language, and beloved stories about human nature—beneficial material, whether or not they think any of it's true.

Uptight moralists adore the Bible despite its explicit references to sex and immorality. Cautious mommies and daddies read this

book to their kids, even though parts of it detail some of the most horrific violence in human history. Politicians and judges swear on it, even though they occasionally object to it being displayed in public.

It's a book that has inspired, at various times, the decisions of great leaders of mankind and the obsessions of serial killers. Abolitionists used it to justify their actions. So did slaveholders. It

drove Martin Luther King Jr. to push for civil rights while fueling the lynch mobs who opposed him. It has convinced presidents to go to war. It has convinced presidents to embrace peace.

The Bible has motivated its readers to tend the sick, feed the poor, shelter the homeless, educate the uneducated, and fight for the oppressed. It also motivated the Crusades. And the Inquisition. And apartheid.

It gives us joyful holidays like Christmas and Easter. It gives us doomsday prophets and end-of-the-world predictions.

It's stuffed with passages commanding believers to love one another and live in Spirit-led unity. These passages are read by Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Southern Baptists, National Baptists, ELCA Lutherans, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, African Methodist Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Charismatics, Pentecostals, Assemblies of God, Nazarenes, Quakers, Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Churches of God in Christ, Bible churches, and a steaming stew of nondenominational congregations.

Jews dig the Bible. At least the first part, which they call the Torah and which Christians call the Old Testament. But Jewish readers aren't so interested in the New Testament, on account of all the Jesus stuff.

Christians dig it, too. They're all about the New Testament, but tend to forget about most of the Old Testament, except for the first few chapters of Genesis and a handful of childhood Sunday school stories.

Yes, the Bible is an interesting book. Which is why nine out of ten American households own at least one copy, according to a 2005 update from the Barna Research Group. It's why six out of ten Americans confess to reading the Bible every once in a while,

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according to a 2000 Gallup poll. Yet most of us Bible readers don't know Ezra from Esther or Zephaniah from Zechariah. Few of us

The Gideons International distributes more than one million free Bibles every week. Which means people are stealing them from hotel rooms, and the Gideons are cool with that.

can list all four Gospels or recite half of the Ten Commandments. A majority of us can't even identify who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.²

That's why you need this book—a handy, easy-to-read, occasionally amusing guide to the Bible and its characters, events, translations, and history.

Why? Because the Bible is the all-time best-selling book, one that most people own but apparently don't read, that lots of people read but apparently don't understand, and that people allegedly understand but in a way that makes them jerks.

Let's see what the *Pocket Guide* can do about that.



BIBLICABULARY

(A GLOSSARY OF THE GOOD BOOK)

Sure, a lot of Christians act as if a person can just crack the Bible open and suddenly discover “God’s plan” for his or her life. But let’s be honest, right here at the start: the Bible is not that easy. It’s a difficult book. It’s stacked with unfamiliar terms, exotic concepts, and complex systems of thought that germinate in the Old Testament and ooze into the New Testament and—hey, what’s the difference between the two testaments anyway? And while we’re at it, how can you distinguish an epistle from an apostle? The exile from the exodus? A Pharisee from a Sadducee?

How, indeed. Like any collection of sacred documents written in ancient languages over the span of several centuries, the Good Book has a lingo all its own.

For any longtime reader of the Bible—or, perhaps, any longtime

churchgoer—Bibletalk is second nature. Every other Sunday sermon gives a shoutout to concepts like sin and salvation. Hymns and prayers call attention to faith, grace, and the cross. Then there are all those sweaty TV types weeping and yelling about the Holy Spirit and asking for your money.

The indoctrinated don't bat an eye at this stuff, but the rest of us? Might as well be listening to ancient Hebrew. To minimize the mystification, the *Pocket Guide* kicks off here with the *Biblicabulary*, a handy glossary for the scriptural noob. Here are the words you need to know in order to fully enjoy the coming merriment. Strap on your phylacteries, kids, and let's get started.¹

ALTAR

Any commemorative structure—could be as rustic as a pile of rocks or as official as a raised platform made of wood and bronze—where **sacrifices** or prayers are offered to a deity. **Old Testament** guys like Noah and Abraham erect altars as memorials for major events or encounters with God. Later, the altar becomes a central part of Jewish worship as the place where priests fire up handpicked animals as sacrificial offerings to God. In the **Tabernacle**, folks see the altar as no less than the connecting point between God and mankind and a symbol of God's presence.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: Your basic modern-day religious altar—the table, inside a church, from which communion is served. It's usually located below the pulpit. Plop a bloody sheep down on one of these, and, best-case scenario, you'll be asked to leave. Worst case? You'll be accused of Satanism.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it” (Gen. 8:20).

AMEN

A Hebrew exclamation meaning something along the lines of “I agree” or “so be it.” In the Bible, it usually indicates one’s acceptance of a **covenant** or is tacked on to the end of a psalm. In modern usage, it’s what people say to let God (and any human listeners) know they’re finished praying.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE OR THREE: *Dear God, if you let me pass this test, I promise I will never make fun of televangelists again. Not even the ones on TBN. In Jesus’ name, amen.*

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “‘Cursed is the man who sleeps with his mother-in-law.’ Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’” (Deut. 27:23).²

ANGEL

A heavenly being in service to God and occasionally interacting with mankind. Angels rescue Lot from Sodom, send out Jesus’ birth announcements, bust Peter out of jail, and spend a lot of time worshiping God in heaven.³

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH:

David Boreanaz, Michael Landon, Della Reese, that old guy wearing long underwear in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, or major league ballplayers from Anaheim. Seeing how most angels in the Bible scare the bejudas out of people, they probably aren’t the rosy-cheeked, harp-tickling, feather-winged babies we make them out to be.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp” (2 Kings 19:35).

In late 2008, a Google search for “Bible” generated 169,000,000 results. “Holy Bible” got 5,010,000 results. “*Pocket Guide to the Bible*” earned an astonishing 67,100 results.

2. This is a curse everyone can get behind.

3. Genesis 19:15–17; Luke 1:26–37; Acts 12:6–11; Revelation 5:11–12

APOSTLE

One of the twelve men chosen by Jesus to follow him around, who learn from him as he teaches about the kingdom of God. After Jesus' death, the apostles become the leaders of the early Church. Especially once Paul, who receives a dazzling visit from Jesus on the road to Damascus, starts advertising himself as an apostle.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: Aeropostale, a mall-based retailer of casual apparel for teenagers. One sells hoodies. The other wears robes and sandals. It's not hard.

Don't confuse it with **Epistle**, either.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: "He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14).

ARK OF THE COVENANT

A sacred, gold-covered box made of acacia wood. It houses the stone tablets on which God chiseled the Ten Commandments, plus a jar of manna and Aaron's miraculous walking stick. It's kept in the Holy of Holies in the **Tabernacle** and later gets moved to Solomon's **Temple**. Why? Because it's a reminder to the Israelites of God's presence.

ALSO KNOWN AS: Ark of the Testimony, Ark of the Agreement, Ark of the Lord

NOT ALSO KNOWN AS: The Ark of Noah, which holds a bunch of animals rather than stone tablets and is made of gopher wood instead of acacia wood. Also, it's a boat.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: Archeologically inclined Nazis will want to avoid opening the Ark of the Covenant, as it will melt their faces off.⁴

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight” (1 Sam. 6:13).

ATONEMENT

The process of removing or forgiving **sins**, usually through the shedding of **blood** from an animal sacrificed in substitution for humans. After the sacrificial death of **Christ**, the word refers to the restored relationship between God and man.

It works this way: God is holy. People sin. The holiness/sinfulness divide is a significant one. But then Jesus dies as a big-league atoning **sacrifice** in place of humanity, and God offers forgiveness to those who have **faith** in him. The stuff sin screws up? It gets unscrewed. This is pretty much the central idea of Christianity.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “He shall burn all the fat on the altar as he burned the fat of the fellowship offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for the man’s sin, and he will be forgiven” (Lev. 4:26).

BLOOD

You know what blood is, so quit acting all uninformed. Biblically speaking, blood becomes one of the most important symbolic concepts of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Blood smeared on the doorframe protects the Israelites during the Passover. Priests sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the **altar**, and the people of God (in the **Old Testament**, at least) are prohibited from eating blood. The blood of an animal—because it represents life—is the necessary ingredient in the process of **atonement**. Which leads to the **New Testament**, in which people gain atonement for their **sins** through the innocent blood shed by **Christ** on the **cross**.⁵

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PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE OR TWO: At the Last Supper, Jesus tells the **disciples** that the wine represents his blood. But good Southern Baptists know that, though he says “wine,” he really means “grape juice.”

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you” (Exod. 12:13).

BRIDE/BRIDEGROOM

A metaphor throughout the Bible in which the relationship between God and his people is compared to the bond between a husband and wife, a bridegroom and his bride. In the **Old Testament**, Hosea lives out the illustration with the prostitute Gomer, his unfaithful skeeze-bride and an all-too-willing object lesson. But the idea doesn't really come of age until Paul spins it in the **New Testament**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: All the explicit sexual imagery in Song of Solomon. For years, prim and proper believers figured the spicy book had to be some sort of deeply symbolic bride/bridegroom code. But now, most scholars just think it's erotic poetry.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev. 21:2).

CANAAN

See **Promised Land**.

CHRIST

The official title for Jesus, and not, as some believe, Jesus' last

name. *Christ* is the **New Testament** (Greek) equivalent of the **Old Testament** (Hebrew) term *Messiah*. It specifically refers to Jesus' role in restoring the broken relationship between God and man.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: Jesus. *Jesus* is the name Mary and Joseph give the child at his **circumcision**, because when an angel appears to you with a pre-selected baby name, you follow that lead. *Jesus* is the name. *Christ* is his title. They're not interchangeable.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: ““But what about you?” he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ’” (Mark 8:29).

CIRCUMCISION

Let's say you're a boy, born to a nice Jewish family around three thousand years ago. You're stumbling around in the hot, dusty desert. Your mom and dad are cranky because the only thing to eat is manna, and they've been lost for forty years. You're just getting used to this outside-the-womb thing—the pooping, sleeping, and whatnot—until you hit the eighth day of your life, and some old bearded dude with a craggy flint knife starts poking around your tallywacker. And—hey! *Ow! There is SO not supposed to be blood down there!* But despite

the unbearable drama, you're not too upset about the sudden violent loss of your foreskin. For one thing, it's only a useless flap of flesh, right? And for another thing, this physical disfigurement sets you apart from your archrivals, the Assyrians and Amalekites and Philistines. When one of them gets an eyeful of your scarred-up

At least ten different abbeys, churches, and/or cities throughout history have laid claim to possessing the Holy Prepuce. That's right: the divine foreskin of Jesus.

penis, they'll see evidence of God's **covenant** with you and your people! Or something like that.

PLEASE USE IT IN A SENTENCE: Back in biblical times, only those males who had experienced circumcision could participate in public worship, which begs the question: who enforced this rule, and how?

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gen. 17:11).

COVENANT

Biblically, the agreement between God and humanity to restore their sin-tainted relationship. God promises to bless and protect **Israel** as long as they follow a detailed assortment of holiness

Another blessed foreskin factoid: In the fourteenth century, Saint Catherine of Siena had a famous vision in which Jesus placed his amputated foreskin on her finger as a wedding ring.

codes and regulations. And it's a long, serious list. Good thing the sacrificial death of Jesus in the **New Testament** sets aside the old, rules-based agreement, promising **salvation** by **faith** in **Christ**.

By the way, ancient covenants usually get formalized by an elaborately gross ritual. The

covenanters slice an animal lengthwise and set the two slices opposite each other, separated by a narrow gap.⁶ To enact the covenant, the two parties walk between the bloody, steaming slabs of meat. Symbolically, this reminds them that, should they break the covenant, they'll be cut in half. Lengthwise.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: A coven, which is a gathering of witches. Witches aren't usually too concerned with God's rules