

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR ROB BELL'S BOOK

What is the Bible?

How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories
Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything

Part I: There's Something More Going On Here

1. MOSES AND HIS MOISTURE

What do you think of the cyclical view of history that was prevalent in Abram's day? Do you think we're born into a cycle of events that endlessly repeats itself? Are we doing the same thing our parents did, and is that the same thing our kids will do? Is that a bad thing?

Are we born into a cycle of world events that endlessly repeats itself? Do nations rise and fall and rise again? Does the political pendulum swing left and right and back again? Are people oppressed and freed and oppressed again? Does anything change forever? Is that a bad thing?

Is religion like that, too? Are we stuck in a repeating cycle of religion?

What does it mean to step out of those cycles forever? Could there still be something new, a new direction, after all this time? What would it take to become a new kind of people living the way of love rather than greed, superiority or violence? Is it possible to live that way in our world? Are we, like Abram, being called to way of living that's wildly new and unprecedented? Is this story really about our lives, today?

Do you think the world could ever really head in a new direction? How would you answer Bell's question near the end of the chapter: "Are our lives set in stone and unable to change, or can we be set free from whatever it is that enslaves us?" Is that what this story is really about?

2. SOMEBODY WROTE SOMETHING DOWN

Does understanding that this is a book written by real people living in real places in real times change the way you read it? Why? Are you more open to reading for inspiration and hope if you're less concerned about rationalizing inconsistencies or troubling passages?

Would you tell stories about God differently in different circumstances? For example, the day you get married vs. the day a loved one dies in a tragic accident? The day your first child is born vs. the day your house burns down in a fire? The day you unexpectedly lose your job vs. the day your child gets accepted into their dream college? The day you watch news footage of a hurricane destroying thousands of homes and lives vs. the day you see the most perfect rainbow on your evening walk? Could different circumstances evoke different words about the same God? Could they all be equally, yet differently, true?

Why do you think these ancient writers included some experiences while leaving others out? Why were they selective? Do you think what they left in still resonates? Are we still concerned about topics like "love and fear and debt and duty and doubt and anger and skepticism and hate and technology and shame and hope and betrayal" today? Can this book still help us navigate those things?

3. STONERS AND SWINGERS

Have you heard this story before? Does the background here change the way you hear it?

What do you think of Bell's theory about what Jesus wrote in the dust? Do you think he wrote down the accusers' names, or something else? Does it matter to you that we can't know for sure? Why?

How does Jesus confront power structures in this story? Are we called to do the same thing today? Are we good at doing that? Your faith community might be pretty good at feeding the hungry, but do you routinely confront the power structures that create economic disparity and hunger? Is your faith community more like the woman in this story, who seeks grace? Is it more like the religious leaders, who seek compliance with the rules? Or is your faith community more like Jesus, who confronts the system of power that would take this woman's life? Of is your faith community more like the reader, simply watching this injustice unfold?

4. WHO PAID JESUS' BILLS?

What do you think about the role of women in this chapter? Why does it seem so different than what we might consider the "traditional" role of women in the church? How do you explain that gap?

Does that problem still exist today? Does the irony in this story, with Herod funding the movement he's trying to destroy, still apply today? Given the current political and religious climate, does anything in this story strike you as ironic, funny or subversive? What? What is your faith community doing to eliminate this gender gap?

What do you find interesting about Joanna? Why does she give up a life of comfort to travel with Jesus? Why don't we hear about her more often? Do you ever find yourself forced to choose between comfort and traveling with Jesus?

5. ANAKEPHALAI OSSATHAI

Are there stories in your life like the one about the camping trip in this chapter – stories about miserable moments that are transformed in the retelling? Do the worst moments become the best parts of the story? Why?

Can the story of your whole life be retold this way? How about the story of your faith community? Do you think the story of all humankind will be retold this way one day? What will the ending be?

Do you think God can really and truly put the world back together and bring unity to all things? How? Do you believe this is happening right now? How do you live differently if you believe it's true? How do you live if you don't believe it's true? How are you contributing to this ongoing, messy, fractured but ultimately life-giving story? Are you intentionally helping the effort to put it back together, or do your actions contribute to the fractures? How?

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF ALTITUDE

What do you think about the description at the beginning of this chapter of the kingdom-of-God message as an expanding reality? What do you think of the idea that it spreads and grows "beyond whatever boundaries it's given"? Is that true? Is it still spreading and growing beyond boundaries today? Are we helping that process or hindering it? What boundaries exist today that attempt to contain God's message of hope and grace?

Do you ever think that we as a faith community struggle too much with the details? Is it important sometimes to fly higher and look at the big picture, the larger trajectory of this story, and our place in it? Why? What do we gain by doing that?

7. SMOKING FIREPOTS

What do you make of the smoking firepot in this story? What does it mean? What is different about this deal than the other deals that were “cut” in ancient times? What is it about this God that is so different, or so special? Can this God be trusted?

How does this story represent a giant leap forward? Is it difficult to imagine how this story is progressive and radical for its day? What changes when we do? Do you think God still has progressive and radical ideas for us today? Are we as Christians called only to understand what happened in these ancient stories, or are we also called to look for the next “smoking firepot” in our world today?

8. AND THE FAT CLOSED IN OVER THE SWORD

How are “politics and power and faith and religion all tied up into one giant hair ball” in the beginning of this chapter? Is that still true today? Do you think our spiritual beliefs and the way we organize or govern our society can be completely separate things? Why, or why not?

Have you ever noticed “crying out” as a theme in the Bible, one that’s repeated over and over and over again? Are we still crying out today? What happened in the Bible each time the people cried out? What do you think will happen this time? Does God always hear the cry of the oppressed? If not, why not? If so, why are some people still oppressed today? Does God call God’s people (that’s us) into the work of ending oppression? Why don’t we do it? What do we have to lose?

What do you think the story of Ehud is really about? Does it elevate peace and freedom through violence? Or does it reveal how this repeated cycle of violence doesn’t ultimately get us anywhere? Have the people in this story who are caught in the cycle of violence lost their way? Have we?

9. THE THING ABOUT PEARLS AND PIGS

What does Jesus mean when he tells us not to give pearls to pigs? How is this advice related to living without anxiety? What does it say about the need for power or control? Are we still struggling with a need for power or control?

How does the order in which these stories are told affect their meaning? What are the writers trying to accomplish? Is there more going on here? What?

10. TURNING THE GEM

What’s the difference between reading literally and reading literately? What is the difference between a poem, a letter, and an exaggerated story? What is the best way to read them?

What kind of book is the Bible? How would you categorize it? Is it supposed to give answers or evoke questions? Is it supposed to provoke you? Why? How can we discover our own story while reading someone else’s story?

11. LARRY IN THE AIRPORT

How does the story behind the embrace in the airport affect the way you see the events unfold? Do you watch with a different kind of excitement or anticipation? Why? Does the information you know about these characters open up the story in new and unexpected ways? How? Is the Bible like that, too? Could it be? Do you think you could read it with that kind of excitement and anticipation? Is there something bigger going on here? What?

Part II: The Nature of that Something

12. FLOOD

Did you know that there are many ancient flood stories? (Google it!) At first, is this story about Noah similar to all the others? Is it natural to seek answers or explanations for natural disasters and tragedy? Is it also natural to use catastrophic events like floods to tell a larger story?

By the end, what makes this flood story different than all the other ancient flood stories? What is a covenant, and what does it mean to have a covenant relationship with God? Why is that concept such a big deal?

What do we miss when we try to “prove” this story, or take it too literally? Is this story meant to be read in that way? Why, or why not? How is this story a huge leap forward into a new understanding about God? Can this story be both primitive and progressive at the same time? How?

13. FISH

Is this story about a fish? Is the fish the most important part of this story? Or have we been too hung up on details all along?

Do we spend a lot of time putting people in categories? What happens when people don't behave the way we think they should? Can Christians make mistakes? Can Christians be corrupt? Can atheists walk in the way of Jesus? Can bad people have good intentions? Can truth come from unexpected places? Can God love our enemies? Are some people more worthy of God's love than others? Have religious people cornered the market on kindness and prayer? Can a pagan sailor see the divine more clearly than a prophet? Can a violent or wicked group of people be more open to God's love and forgiveness than a community of faith? Why, and how? What insight does this story have for us about the way we look at other people? Is that insight more profound than a miraculous fish? Why, or why not?

While we debate about the giant fish, do we miss other questions and truths that lurk beneath the surface? Like what? Why does Jonah get so depressed and angry in this story? What does Jonah need to learn? Does he ever learn it? Can Jonah forgive the Assyrians? Can Israel forgive the Assyrians? Has God already forgiven the Assyrians? Why?

Why does this book in the Bible end with a question? Who is supposed to answer it? How would we answer it today? How are we answering it every day with our actions, or policy, our money, our schools, our neighborhoods, etc.?

Who are the Assyrians in our world today? Who are they in your story? Who do you struggle to forgive? Has God already forgiven them? Do you find that infuriating? Why?

14. SON

To repeat Bell's question, can you see how child sacrifice lurks on the edges of the Old Testament? How does this game of earning God's favor and offering sufficient gratitude quickly escalate into sacrificing the most valuable thing you have? How, then, does this apparently barbaric story about God demanding a child sacrifice actually become a progressive new way to think about a God who doesn't demand such things?

Do you think it's true that this God blesses us freely rather than demanding that we bless God? Is God ego-centric or generous? How does this change the way you see your calling in the world, and your role as a follower of Jesus? Is it possible that we as Christians have lost our focus over time? In what way? Is it possible that this old, primitive story can re-focus our calling and the way we reach out to bless the world?

15. HE HAD NO IDEA WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT

What did you think of these three stories – about the flood, the fish, and the son, before we read them here? Has anything changed? Do they reveal a God who is about destruction and barbaric retribution, or a God who is pulling us forward into a better future? How do we know?

What do you think of the conversation between Bell and the other pastor? Have you had conversations like this before? How can people with so much background, education and experience read this book so differently? Do you think the Bible is like a "flat line," in which each verse has equal weight? Or is this a story, a progression forward, in which the characters learn new things, gaining new information and insight along the way as their relationship with the divine deepens and expands? Is this story going somewhere? Is your story going somewhere?

Which God makes the most sense to you, in your experience? The one who acts randomly, who punishes? Or the one who longs for relationship and covenant, who extends grace every time? Should we be afraid of God? Why, or why not?

16. ALL THAT VIOLENCE

Have you been taught that the violence in the Bible proves that God will send judgment down upon the earth? Or has the notion of God's wrath kept you from really engaging in this story?

Consider these lines from the book: "The violence isn't that surprising; what's surprising is that among all that violence are new ideas about serving and blessing and nonviolence. ... What you find in the Bible are stories accurately reflecting the dominant consciousness of the day, and yet right in among and sometimes even within those very same violent stories, you find radically new ideas about freedom, equality, justice, compassion, and love. New ideas sit side by side with old ideas."

Is it possible that this book isn't about God's wrath at all? Is it possible that this book is really about the emerging understanding that God doesn't participate in violence or conquest? As this book progresses, can you see the old narratives of warring gods being continually replaced by cutting-edge concepts of grace and love?

Are our own violent narratives today being replaced by even more advanced concepts of grace and love? Or have we stalled? What do we need to do today to keep this story moving forward toward more grace and love, and away from the violent attitudes that divides us?

Do you think these writers intended to shock or repulse us with violent stories? Do you think stories that contain senseless violence help illustrate how senseless violence really is? Do you think it's a mistake to go into any sort of battle claiming that God is on your side? Why, or why not?

17. DO WHAT TO OUR WHATS?

Is circumcision required in order to be part of the new thing that God is doing in the world? How or why did that tradition begin? How did it change from a covenant into a rite of entry? Did people lose sight of its original intent? Does that still happen? Do religions still insist on certain customs or rites that seem disconnected, inconsistent or arbitrary today? Why?

Does the kingdom of God require initiation and suffering? Is it okay for human beings to decide what is required of other human beings before they can participate in the movement of God in the world? Is it okay to have evolving thoughts and opinions about why certain customs or rites matter, and which ones are at stake? Why, or why not?

Is there value in understanding past traditions? Is there value in continuing them? Is there also value in knowing when to end, loosen or change those traditions? Do we, or should we, change with the times? Why, or why not?

18. GIVE IT UP FOR SIDON!

Who are the Sidonians? Have you heard of them before? Why do these people and their history factor into the Jesus story? Why does Jesus go there? Why would he heal the Sidonians, talk with them and be amazed by their faith? Can you imagine how startled and angry his disciples must have been about this? Does this remind you of another story we read? (See chapter 13.)

Bell writes that Jesus “simply dismisses the history of his tribe with the Sidonian tribe.” What if we could do that? What if we were able to simply dismiss all the wounds, grievances, jealousies, hatred, bad behavior and past transgressions that affect our relationships with other people? What would that change? Would living that way make you feel more free? Why does it seem so impossible?

Does it seem odd to you that Jesus insists that it’s “better to be a Sidonian than a devoted religious person who thinks the Sidonians are cursed”? What does that mean, and why would Jesus say it? What new thing is Jesus doing here?

19. HE CAN'T EVEN SAY HIS NAME

Do you know the story of the Good Samaritan? Does it read differently here? In what way?

Why does this lawyer set Jesus up with these questions? What is his agenda?

Why is Jesus’ response so shocking, or surprising? Is this story ultimately about roadside assistance, or doing good deeds, or even helping people in need? Or is Jesus calling this lawyer to something even bigger, something more surprising, something we have trouble saying out loud? Does this story remind you of any other stories we read? (See chapter 13 and chapter 18.)

Who is your neighbor? Is that something we’re supposed to debate, define or measure? How are you being a neighbor? And how does all of that relate to the kind of aliveness that Jesus offers?