

INTRODUCTION



HE ANCIENT WORLD WAS A DANCE-OFF. IF YOU WANTED people to take your gods seriously, you had better come to impress. If Aladdin brought a magic lamp, Solomon had to bring a ring that captured demons. If Buddha had Nirvana, then Jesus had better come back from the dead. If your religion didn't have the mythological equivalent of a headspin, it was going to get served. And the apocryphal writings of early Jews and Christians, while embarrassing to some, contain some of the sweetest dance moves either of those religions ever came up with.

The fantastical nature of many of these writings is a large reason why they weren't included in the canonical Bible. The outlandish dance moves of the Jewish and Christian religions were retired as church leaders decided it would be better for the faithful to square-dance within neatly kept lines. While ancient religion tried to impress, modern religion worries about credibility. But there's no reason to be embarrassed by these books.

A friend of mine, the novelist Art Edwards, once told me about an awkward encounter he'd had with some Christian missionaries. After he listened politely to their pitch, they asked him what he thought about the Bible.

"I think the Bible is a work of fiction," he said, "and that's why it's so important." Or, as the third century Christian Tertullian argued, religious stories are only worth believing *because* they are absurd. Trusting plausible, scientifically mundane stories requires no more faith than the belief that you can get a loose meat sandwich at Arby's. Where's the action in that?

God Is Disappointed in You, the first book by Shannon Wheeler and myself, was a condensed and simplified version of the Bible. The purpose of this book is to do the same for the apocryphal writings of the early Jews and Christians. These texts didn't make it into the Bible for various reasons. Some were simply written too late, some were declared heretical, and others were just too weird. While not canon,



“He’s trying to write the prequel.”

I would argue that these texts, however strange, are absolutely vital to understanding the Bible, as they were an important part of the religious landscape from which the Bible and our modern religious traditions come.

For example, in The Gospel of Luke, having successfully pulled off an exorcism, Jesus takes a moment to trash-talk, saying, **“Behold, one greater than Solomon is here!”** But his victory dance only makes sense within the context of the Testament of Solomon, which tells the story of Solomon capturing demons and then using them as non-union labor to build the temple. When the Prophet Isaiah tells the story of Lucifer being cast down from Heaven for rebelling against God, he’s not referring to the Book of Genesis—which doesn’t tell this story at all. He’s referencing passages from the Midrash. Most Christians believe Peter was crucified upside down. But again, this story does not come from the Bible, but from the Acts of Peter.

This book is by no means comprehensive. There's way too much apocrypha to include everything. It does, however, cover many crucially important books and stories that informed the faith of early Jews and Christians. *Apocrypha Now* covers work from a variety of sources, including the Jewish Midrash, the Apocrypha (which actually appears as a sort of intermission in Catholic Bibles), the Talmud, and the Gnostic Gospels.

The apocryphal books are not merely a collection of outtakes. These are not the Biblical equivalent of Dom DeLuise [REDACTED] up his lines at the end of *The Cannonball Run*. The word "apocrypha" means "secret" or "obscure." This is literature that has been hidden from you for one reason or another. We thought you should have it.

I observed a few ground rules when writing this book. As with *God Is Disappointed in You*, all the events described actually happened, either according to the texts upon which this book is based, or as historical context to those texts. I took liberties in the dialogue both to make the story interesting and to insert my personal interpretation. Eliezer never actually calls Abraham out on his racism, his touchiness is just what I imagine would be going through the mind of someone who has just been told by his lighter-skinned friend that he wasn't good enough to marry into the family.

In the "Infancy Gospel of Christ," the young Jesus really does kill a playmate and turn several children into goats (sheep, in my version, for reasons of symbolism). My own desire to make sense of the "Infancy Gospel of Christ" fuels a moment where an angry mother berates Jesus—perhaps Jesus's worst moment as a human being forces him to recognize his divinity. Christ's own shortcomings proclaim his purpose on Earth—to bring salvation to the imperfect and the broken.



*“I don’t care if I am in Heaven.
I’m still mad at him.”*

PART ONE

THE MIDRASH



THE MIDRASH IS A COLLECTION OF TEXTS THAT FLESH OUT the story of the Jews in the Old Testament. While some of the Midrash was written later to complement the Torah, many of the midrashim come from the oral tradition that created the Torah. After Israel became an established nation instead of a group of nomadic tribes, they decided to commit the Oral Torah to writing—a huge undertaking.

Writers played for keeps in those days. All writing was recorded on vellum made out of the skins of sheep and goats, which is pretty spendy when you consider you only get about eight sheets per goat. Knowing this, they couldn't write down their *entire* oral history, which would have killed every tiny animal on the planet. Instead, they only committed to parchment the parts they considered absolutely essential, and that became the written Torah.

Later, when the Jews were feeling more flush with sheep, they committed the rest of the oral tradition to parchment and that became what we know as the Midrash. In many cases, these texts add nuance to the stories we're familiar with in the Old Testament. Sometimes, they change their meaning completely. For instance, in the Bible, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an afterthought which only alludes to the "great wickedness" of these people which everyone (including myself) assumed was code for gay sex.

But, according to the midrashim, a much more elaborate story emerges. The great sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were their greed and xenophobia. It was for these sins that Sodom and the other cities of the Jordan Plain were destroyed.

The midrash seems based on one simple maxim: that God does not create throw away characters. Every person and event in the Bible is important, and is there to make sense of the whole. The midrash provides that context.