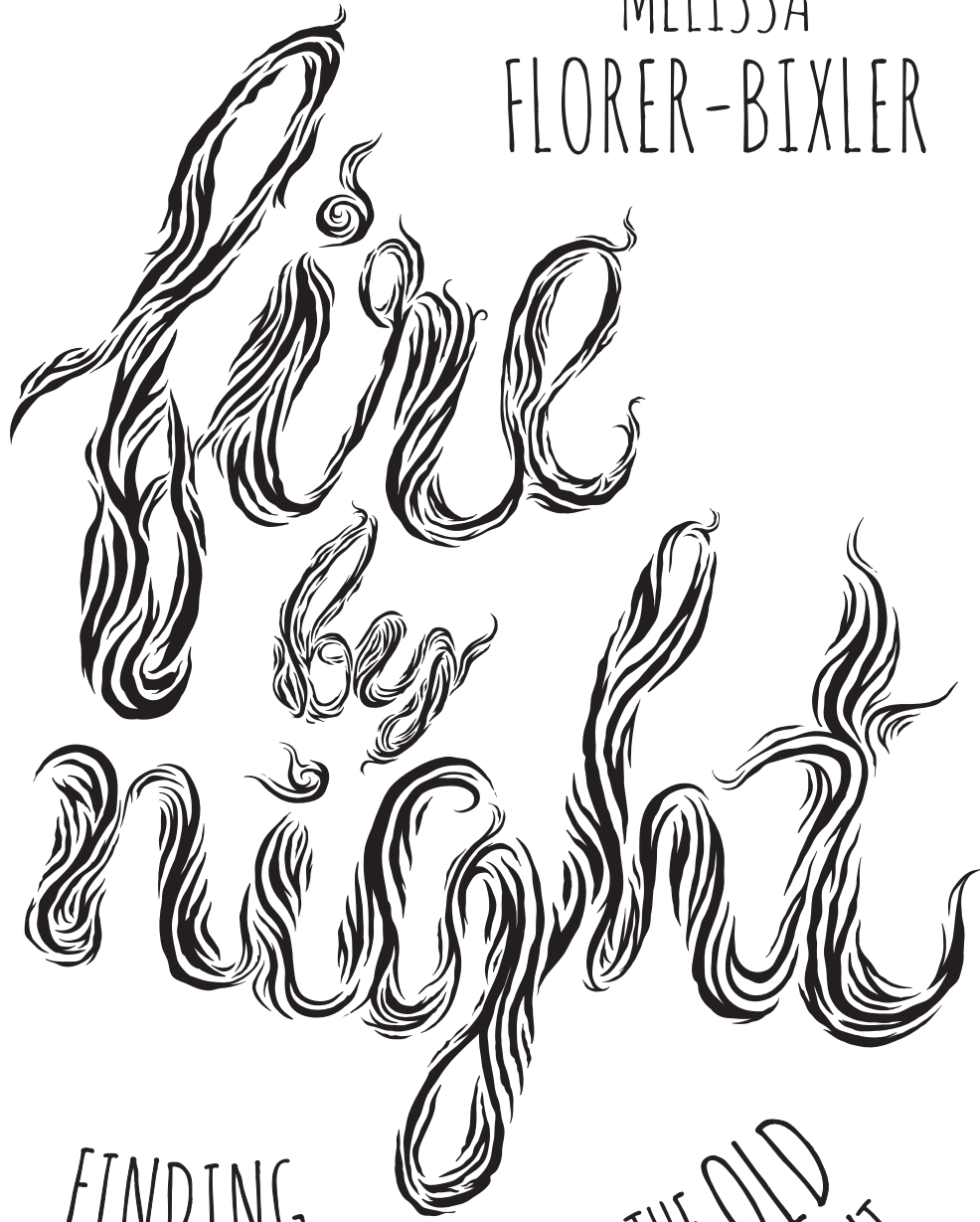


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FINDING  
GOD IN THE PAGES OF THE OLD  
TESTAMENT

STUDY GUIDE *by* MELISSA FLORER-BIXLER



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# PRAYER AND PREFACE

1. The opening prayer is based on images and metaphors for God found in the Old Testament. Does one in particular strike you? Take time to find the reference in the Bible (the Scripture references are found in the endnotes on p. 185) and share it with the group. Were you surprised to find God described this way?
2. What metaphors, like the one from Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*, would you use to describe God in the Bible? Do those metaphors change as you encounter God from the Old Testament to the New?
3. What do you find challenging about the Old Testament? What do you find challenging about the New Testament?
4. Florer-Bixler writes that her contention in the book, one shared throughout the history of Christianity, is that the God in the Old and New Testaments is the same. Is this a new idea to you? In what ways is it challenging for you? In what ways do you see consistency between the testaments?

## CHAPTER 1

1. On page 28, Florer-Bixler talks about “indebtedness” to the past. In what ways, for good or for ill, are you and your community indebted to the past as a denomination, local church, or regional community? What interpretations of Scripture form you and your community?
2. On page 31, Florer-Bixler talks about the rabbis introducing her to an exegetical practice of grappling and dialogue. How has your personal or corporate practice of reading the Bible resembled this, or not?
3. Florer-Bixler tells the story (pp. 32–33) of rabbis deciding the cleanliness of an oven “according to the majority.” How would such a practice develop in your own context? What would be the challenges or obstacles facing a more “argumentative” reading of the Bible?
4. If you were to think of a metaphor for your understanding of the Bible, what would it be? Has that metaphor changed over time?
5. What do you “bring” to your reading of the Bible? How does your social location (age, sexual identity, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, geography—such as rural or urban) affect how you interpret Scripture?

## CHAPTER 2

1. What words or thoughts do you associate with the book of Leviticus? Where have those ideas come from?
2. On page 43, the author writes, “For ancient Israel, holiness takes on spatial character.” Are there ways we organize our religious space that are meaningful to you? What do you notice about the architecture of religious spaces in other places that visually organize holiness?
3. What do you hear of significance in the phrase “I am the Lord” that is found at the center of the Torah (p. 45)? What does that mean for your understanding of God’s relationship to creation?
4. What is your relationship to your religious neighbors? How do you think about the shared and diverging relationship of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism around the stories found in the Old Testament?
5. Florer-Bixler mentions the absence of a prohibition against interracial marriage in the Old Testament, a prohibition often assumed by white nationalist groups. Can you name other ideas, understandings, or misperceptions that we or others “enact” on the Old Testament that are not accurate? How does that change or challenge our relationship to other faith communities like Judaism and Islam, for whom these stories are core to their faith and identity?

## CHAPTER 3

1. How have you heard the story of Sodom and Gomorrah used in popular culture or in religious contexts? What emotions or connections do you make to that story?
2. As you reflect on victims of violence, how do you reckon with the Bible's movements between justice and mercy? Are there ways these are held together, or does one always come at the expense of the other?
3. Florer-Bixler suggests that the story of Sodom is a way for us to understand a contemporary concept—structural oppression—in an ancient context. In what ways does reading the story through this lens change its meaning for you? Share about a form of structural oppression that concerns you. With this in mind, analyze that oppression and identify each character from the story of Sodom—the daughters, Lot, the “visitors at the door,” the angels—and how they map onto that form of structural oppression.
4. The author shares how she identified with Lot and his family, “looking back in longing at what I have known, trusting that it’s better for me to take my chances in benefiting from bureaucratic and institutional oppression than in forging a new world” (p. 65). In what ways do you identify with Lot and his family? In what ways have you benefited from systemic, structural oppression?
5. Where in your community do you see God “intervening in human catastrophe, coming down into human life, breaking apart systems, loosing those who have been led to believe that this is the way things must be” (p. 69)?

## CHAPTER 4

6. Imagine being in the place of Israel, newly released from slavery, living in a land ruled by the sword. In what ways could God care for you and for your people? What challenges you when you consider this predicament in the ancient world?
7. When we consider narrative violence in the Old Testament, Florer-Bixler notes, we may begin to ask, “Does this narrative tell us what God thinks about God or about what a human character in the story thinks about God? And is that person in the story right?” (p. 74). Does this challenge your understanding of the role Scripture plays in our life or the authority we vest in it?
8. The author writes, “Enemies are real.” In the church, especially in pacifist churches, this can be a difficult truth to wrestle through. How does the Bible’s strong proclamation of enmity fit together with the understanding for “love our enemies”?
9. Who is your favorite “biblical loser”? What have you learned from their story?
10. The story of Esau frames the narrative of the Amalekites. Are there are other places in Scripture where this kind of framing (another story, or another narrative arc) changes your understanding of a story or a character?

## CHAPTER 5

1. What makes a place holy? Is space and place holy because of something that happened there or a blessing offered over it? How have you seen space or place take on the character of holiness or sacredness?
2. The Doctrine of Discovery utilized a theology of holiness and choseness to oppress and remove indigenous peoples from their lands. Do you still see this at work today? Are there other ways we claim the holiness of nation or country today?
3. Florer-Bixler talks about times when we try to domesticate God. What were times when your life was disrupted by God?
4. Who are the ordinary saints of your life? Who shows you an “untamable God in their own untamable lives” (p. 94)?
5. Is there a place that to others seems ordinary but to you is holy? What made it so? How did God come to that place?

## CHAPTER 6

1. What are your memories of darkness taking on a sense of either safety or dread? What stories in your own life relay these associations to darkness?
2. In the book of Job, God is hidden in a whirlwind. What mysteries of God are hidden from you in the whirlwind? In what ways do these mysteries increase your awe of God, and in what ways do they make God seem more distant or remote?
3. How does Job’s disease and vulnerability before the darkness of God help us to prepare for the coming of Jesus? How is the season of Advent, leading to Christmas, changed when we dwell on stories like that of Matthew 24’s “thief in the night”?
4. What does it mean to love what we do not control? Have there been times in your life when you’ve asked to love what you do not control? What does this tell you about learning to love God?
5. How might darkness and night offering us space for faith make their way into our worship services? How can we retain a place for this metaphor in our churches?

## CHAPTER 7

1. It isn’t unusual to think of the sacrificial system in the Bible as a matter of punishment or reparation for sin. How does the author’s description of the festival of harvest, or ingathering, challenge these ideas?
2. Describe something beautiful you saw this week. How often do you take time to practice noticing? How might our faith be changed if we took time for this?
3. The author writes that God initiates into Israel’s life a festival for noticing the good things around them and sharing these things with their neighbors. What does this tell you about the character of God? How might that challenge or compete with other images of God in the Old Testament?
4. Is there someone in your life who is especially good at noticing or cultivating beauty in the world? What does that person bring to your life, and how do they help to shape your faith?
5. What are the rituals or practices in the church that celebrate the beauty, goodness, and abundance of God? How could we nurture more of these rituals and practices?

## CHAPTER 8

1. In *The Saint John's Bible*, mistakes are made beautiful. What would it mean to embellish your mistakes and failures as signs of the beauty for an ever growing and changing human life? How might that change your relationship to yourself and to others?
2. Who or what is overlooked in your community and church? What does God delight in that we often pass by?
3. What will it mean for us to turn our attention to overlooked places the way that God pays attention to birds?
4. What have animals taught you about God?

## CHAPTER 9

1. Who are the vulnerable people in your community? Is there a time where these people have brought healing to you or others?
2. The author shares Tertullian's remarks about the foolishness of God. How do you see the "foolishness of God" in Scripture? How does this change or challenge you to act in the world?
3. Florer-Bixler shares about a L'Arche community. Are there times where living with and caring for others has shaped you? Do you know of other intentional communities who share life in this way?
4. What expectations has the world placed on you? How are those expectations challenged by the God we encounter in the Bible? How have you undone those expectations in yourself, and what work is there still to do?
5. What other stories in the Bible like that of Naaman offer a similar description of strength in weakness?

## CHAPTER 10

1. Florer-Bixler shares Rowan Williams's thought that heresies are "theological positions that put too fine a point on descriptions of God" (p. 156). Are there other unnamed heresies at work in your life or in the church? How do we limit God's action and being in the world?
2. Which stories in the Bible form your imagination for God's love? Do they connect to stories in your own life?
3. How does the author describe the purpose of creation? How does that confirm or conflict with what you have been taught or believe about the purpose of human life on earth?
4. Florer-Bixler describes "seeing" the Trinity at a hospital bed. Are there stories like this in your life where interconnectedness alongside distinctiveness taught you something about a God who is three-but-one?
5. What is the practice of communion at your church? How does the image of the three visitors eating with Abraham change or shift your understanding of the Lord's Supper? Are there other stories of tables in the Bible that might inform the way we practice this ritual?

## CHAPTER 11

1. The author writes that the story of Naomi and Ruth complicates our ideas about what it means to be home. In light of this story, what defines “home” for you?
2. Has there been a time when family moved beyond the boundaries of bloodlines and genetics?
3. The author writes that the church, like friendship, is not a fixed and unmoving institution, but occasional and fragile. Does this match your experience of church?
4. At what times have you felt the church most deeply connected to its identity and mission as the body of Jesus Christ?
5. Do you have a friendship where someone has “made space” for you to become fully yourself? What is special about that friendship?