

# Solange De Santis

*Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*

By Bruce Feiler

HarperCollins

American author Bruce Feiler has forged an enviable career by hanging out in interesting places – small-town Japan, Oxford and Cambridge, a circus, Nashville – and writing about them. His fifth book, *Walking the Bible*, starts with an ambitious premise – visiting the physical locations of the first five books of the Bible – and moves into the less-tangible territory of the human desire to connect with God. Along the way, he creates a work of magic.

Mr. Feiler, who is in his late 30s, was raised Jewish in Savannah, Ga. and now lives in New York City. In the first chapter of *Walking the Bible*, he notes that like so many of his contemporaries, he lost touch with religious observances, and with the Bible, after leaving home at the end of high school. Gradually, however, he realizes that “there was a conversation going on in the world around me that I wasn’t participating in.” Again, following a well-trod path, he decides in his early thirties to search for meaning in the Bible. But the task seems daunting – hundreds of commentaries, dozens of courses available – and he gives up.

One year, he rewards himself with a trip to the Middle East and a friend casually points out a cliff where Abraham is said to have gone to sacrifice Isaac. “That piece of information hit me like a bolt of Cecil B. DeMille lightning,” Mr. Feiler writes. Suddenly, the idea of physically encountering the ideas and places in the Bible fires his imagination in a way that simply reading the words did not. “I would enter the Bible as if it were any other world ... I would walk in its footsteps, live in its canyons, meet its characters and ask its questions.” He also realizes, in that initial trip, that the Bible is a “living, breathing entity” in those places today, five thousand years after its first lines were written.

Like any classic adventure tale, Mr. Feiler’s begins with discouragement from all sides. He’s told that there are few confirmed sites, that most of them are in war zones and many are supervised by archaeologists who would be about as glad to see him as a scorpion on a trowel. Then he, and his entire book project, are very fortunate to engage the services, and the lively mind, of Avner Goren, a renowned Israeli archaeologist, lecturer and “popularizer of biblical history.”

They begin their journey -- which will take them through Israel, to Egypt, back across the Sinai peninsula and into Jordan – at daybreak on the banks of the Euphrates River in southern Turkey. The land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, currently located in Syria and Iraq but called Mesopotamia in ancient times, saw the first settled, agriculture-based human civilization, starting around 9000 B.C.

The two men, having decided to read the Biblical stories in the locations where they are said to have taken place, start at Genesis and realize immediately that the story relates to the Mesopotamian obsession with water, so necessary for life, and contains elements of earlier creation stories. Mr. Feiler notes that “already the Bible is rooting itself firmly in the ground, in actual places, in geography.” The difference, Mr. Goren points out, is God. In earlier myths, the creation god slays monsters in order to make the world. In the Bible, “he’s much more abstract. He just appears and begins to create the world,” says Mr. Goren.

They follow the story of Noah to its logical place, Mt. Ararat, in eastern Turkey, where Genesis said the ark landed, and explore the various theories about Noah’s ark and the flood. On their last day in Turkey, Mr. Feiler realizes “that this trip had begun to affect me some place deep in my body ... it was someplace so new to me that I couldn’t locate it at

# Solange De Santis

first.” He is, he says, feeling the land so deeply within his soul that it seems to have been part of his DNA.

He and Mr. Goren visit sites in the Holy Land associated with Abraham, his son Isaac and his son Jacob. They run into immediate trouble trying to cross the river Jordan at a natural ford where Abraham would likely have crossed into Canaan. The Israeli Army is only letting Palestinians across. “I don’t care if they rewrite the Bible itself. But they’re not going to do it in a military zone, and they’re *not* going to do it on my bridge,” says an Israeli officer via walkie-talkie.

Mr. Feiler notes that Jews have based their claim to the land of Israel largely on the Bible – that God promised the land to Abraham, patriarch of the Jewish people. Some Palestinians, writes Mr. Feiler, are basing their claims on the contention that they were on the land before the patriarchs and are direct descendants of the Canaanites.

The two men have better luck traveling through the Negev desert, into Egypt – site of the Israelites’ enslavement – and back toward Israel through the Sinai, tracing the Israelites’ great trek through the desert to the Promised Land.

Mr. Feiler, who had actively avoided the idea that he might be making a spiritual journey, gradually enters the text and allows the text to enter his heart. Elements of his story will be familiar to anyone who engages religious faith. At one point, he realizes that being interested in the Bible isn’t necessarily a sign of naivete, but “a sign of health – and maturity.” Well, congratulations for catching up, Mr. Feiler.

Setting aside the moments of wet-behind-the-ears discovery, Mr. Feiler’s lively writing style, talent for amusing and evocative description and narrative drive succeed in making the Bible exciting. He ably transmits that excitement to the reader. His personal journey, in the end, has much to say to the contemporary mind. He does not experience a blinding revelation, a sudden desire to return to Manhattan and fall on his knees, or wander the deserts of the Holy Land.

“Like Jacob, I felt as if I had touched the two arms of the Fertile Crescent and engaged in a struggle that I never set out to have,” he writes. *Trying* to find God, he realizes, is the goal. The original meaning of Israel, “striven with God,” is the true significance of the Promised Land.

For reproduction rights, contact me at:

[solange@solangedesantis.com](mailto:solange@solangedesantis.com)