



Review of *The Year of Living Biblically:*
One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible (2007) by A. J. Jacobs

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I gave myself something wonderful this summer: a gift of laughter. I reread A. J. Jacobs' *New York Times* bestseller, *The Year of Living Biblically*, a copy of which resides in the OBC library. Note the author's satiric piety illustrated on the cover: the mock triumphal stance, the eyes rolled to heaven, the white robe, the sandals, the feet wide apart, having just shuffled their way down Mt. Sinai. Especially, notice The Beard, aka "the pet rabbit," Jacobs' symbol of his mighty quest. Readers will note that as the beard begins to grow, so does the diary, until 380 days later, Jacobs' daily scribbles turn themselves into this riotous memoir. During this time, Jacobs, a journalist and editor at *Esquire*, wrestles with Judaism and Christianity--their right, center, and left wings--with comic lucidity, touching tenderness, and engaging irreverence.

The Author

Jacobs describes himself as "officially Jewish, but Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian Restaurant." When he begins his diary, he resides in an apartment in New York with Julie, his ever-patient, practical, long-suffering wife, and a son, Jasper, almost two years old. In 2004, Jacobs successfully published his first "experimental memoir," *The Know It All*, describing his year reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from cover to cover. While this eccentric work earned plaudits from mainstream sources, it received a wickedly disdainful review from a *New York Times* critic--which I read--and afterward wrongly dismissed Jacobs as an eccentric, self-centered, attention-loving crank.

Attention loving Jacobs is, but crank he is not. Jacobs is intelligent, curious, gutsy, self-effacing, honest, funny, and compassionate. He does not mock or ridicule the drunken dancing rabbis, the folks who argued that dinosaurs and humans walked side by side or the snake handlers who had faith that God would protect them. In fact, Jacobs is especially fond of Jimmy, "the gentlest Christian fundamentalist" he ever met, whom he fearfully watched as Jimmy, the pastor of a tiny rural church in Tennessee, lifted up a copperhead until they were eye to eye. "What did you feel?" he asked Jimmy afterward. "Joyous," Jimmy replied and Jacobs remained respectful. "I wish Jimmy would stop handling snakes," Jacobs still worried near the end of the book.

The Book

Three motives compelled Jacobs to write this particular memoir. First, he hankered for fame—and to make more sales than a rival writer of whom he is obsessively jealous. Second, with his son, Jasper, turning two, the question of religious education loomed large for the family. Feeling guilty for his secularism, Jacobs wanted to take his own spiritual measure: did he himself have a subconscious “God-shaped hole in his heart that needed filled?” Did he himself have an unconscious mystical side? Next, he wanted to explore “some of the Bible’s relevant rules. He tried not to covet, gossip, or lie for a year.” “That was not easy,” he writes afterwards. “I am a journalist in New York.” Another major goal was to explore, which he did at length, “the huge and fascinating topic of biblical literalism.”

He began work on July 7, 2005. First, he formed an interfaith spiritual advisory panel that included pastors, priests, and rabbis. He begged, bought, and borrowed books and mowed through them day by day. By the end of the year, he had collected over a hundred books. As the diary progressed, he briefly embedded himself among the Hasidim and Amish. He spent a day at the Creationism Museum. He attended Sunday School at Pat Robertson’s megachurch. Near the end of the project, he traveled to Israel and dined with his spiritually omnivorous ex-Uncle Gil, former Hindu cult leader, former evangelical Christian, now ultra-orthodox Jew. Jacobs marked the completion of the manuscript by shaving off The Beard on Day 380. “I’m amputating a large part of my identity,” he says semi-sadly to his wife. “I won’t be Jacob anymore, I’ll be back to being a regular old, unremarkable New Yorker, one of millions.” “You look like you’re fourteen,” Julie patiently responded.

The Critics: Jacobs’ memoir gets rave after rave from rabbis, evangelicals, academics, and mainstream literary critics. You can read the “Praise and Reviews” on Jacobs web site at www.ajjacobs.com. Funny he is, modest he is not. You can also read excerpts from these two books, as well as Jacobs’ third book, *The Guinea Pig Diaries: My Life as an Experiment* (2009), which hit the market this week.

The Results of the Quest: During those 380 days, did Jacobs ever discover a God-shaped hole in his heart? Well, no. Did he ever find in himself a secret mystical nature? Again, no. But near the end of his quest, he did experience ten seconds of an “altered state” and he “hoped to God” that the fading “background radiation” would stay “for weeks, months.” It didn’t. But he did honor the charge to be fruitful and multiply. On Day 356, before the memoir was finished, Julie gave birth to twin boys.

Jacobs admits somewhat ruefully on his website that “I never achieved the moral heights of Gandhi or Angelina Jolie.” Did he become a Believer? No. Not even finding an ark and nails, he says, would convince him that God flooded the entire earth. Nor is he convinced that Jesus is the savior of the world though he admires and respects Jesus’ life. Jacobs, however, did become a “reverent agnostic” Jew, and he did learn to pray. He declares himself “more tolerant, especially of religion.” He absorbed this new (for him) concept: “Life is sacred. The Sabbath can be a sacred day. Prayer can be a sacred ritual. There is something transcendent beyond the everyday.” That, alone, made me love the guy.

Final Words: Be forewarned--Some Oakhurst readers may raise an eyebrow from time to time regarding Jacobs’ take on current controversial religious issues, including biblical literalism, Christian fundamentalism, and “the Cafeteria Christian.” At others times, readers may startle themselves with self-recognition. Whatever reactions this powerful, intelligent, and entertaining book elicits, I guarantee three things: readers will definitely laugh, laugh, and laugh--sometimes until it hurts. Enjoy this divine discomfort. I did. Twice. And I will again.