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Book Review: Extending biblical literacy to all

BYLINE: By Martin Sieff SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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Hats off to Kristin Swenson: She has done what I really thought was impossible. She has produced an accessible, freewheeling newcomers' guide to the Bible aimed at attention-deficit-disordered teens, twenty-somethings and soccer moms that manages to avoid being lame.

The Bible is, after all, the immeasurably ancient and ageless foundational book of Western civilization. The epic of the Exodus may have taken place a full millennium before Socrates, Plato and Aristotle walked the streets of Athens. Isaiah prophesied in the streets of Jerusalem when Rome was little more than wild forest. The teachings of Jesus and St. Paul have shaped the Western world and far beyond now for close to 2,000 years.

Can the limitless spiritual, historical, mythological and poetic riches of the Hebrew Bible and the tremendous story of sacrifice and salvation told in the Christian New Testament really be explained in terms of hit TV shows and Hollywood movies without being bowdlerized? To a remarkable degree, though not totally, Ms. Swenson manages to do so.

Great biblical translations, commentaries and scholarship have the effect of a hot, bracing shower. They revive the commonplace, wash off the accumulated cliches and dull sense of familiarity and present the biblical text and teachings as something pristine and new.

Ms. Swenson is a meticulous traditional biblical scholar rather than an original one, at least in this book. But she does not dumb down the Christian story, which she presents to an intended audience of biblical illiterates or blase readers rendered indifferent by a mountain of cliches. There is something attractively striking in a discussion of the matriarch Sarah that points out her subliminal connection with the name of Sarah Connors, the mother of John Connors, the intended savior of mankind in the "Terminator" movies.

And while Ms. Swenson does not actually name Julia Roberts in her breakout role in "Pretty Woman," she does make the delightful point that the prostitute Rahab in the Book of Joshua sets the template for every fictional cliché about good-hearted prostitutes that has ever been written or filmed since - not to mention being explicitly named by St. Paul as one of the ancestresses of Jesus.

Any casual reader of the Bible knows that the patriarch Jacob had something of the savvy snake oil salesman coexisting with his indomitable spirit and incessant wrestling with God to understand the meaning and directions of his life. But there is still a fresh and revealing joy in Ms. Swenson's conclusion that "Jacob was the baseball cap and sagging 'see my underwear' pants to Abraham's fedora and neat wool suit."

Anyone might think of Samson, the blustering, hapless and highly disreputable (anti-) hero of the Book of Judges as "larger than life." But Ms. Swenson goes on to memorably characterize him as "a party boy, hotheaded, a philanderer and smart-aleck." Who can ever forget a spot-on description like that?

Ms. Swenson also provides a welcome service by knowledgeably and confidently explaining Protestant, Catholic and Jewish readings and conceptions of the great biblical texts to each other. In a still compartmentalized religious culture, this is an enlightening and serious service.

It must be admitted that often Ms. Swenson's summary of biblical stories, while always lively and accurate, sometimes skips over the surface of the accounts and takes them far too much at face value. But this is a minor caveat that could be made for most biblical commentaries. Ms. Swenson combines meticulous scholarship with an original eye and a sense of fun. She has succeeded in presenting the Bible anew in a highly accessible way for an audience that either knows nothing about it, or that has been jaded by generations of cliches piled upon the numinous biblical texts. It's a most welcome achievement.

Martin Sieff is a veteran foreign correspondent and the author of "Shifting Superpowers: The New and Emerging Relationship Between the United States, China and India" ([Cato Institute](#), 2010).

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BIBLE BABEL: MAKING SENSE OF THE MOST TALKED ABOUT BOOK OF ALL TIME

By Kristin Swenson

Harper Collins, \$24.99, 343 pages

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