

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschooling

Episode: 17: Secular Bible Study

File Name: Episode 17 – Christy Knockleby on Secular Bible Study

File Length: 24:36

Transcription by Keffy

Courtney: [00:00:00] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curriculum. We are:

Jenn: [00:00:06] Jenn Naughton.

Courtney: [00:00:07] Courtney Ostaff.

AJ: [00:00:09] And AJ Campbell.

Courtney: [00:00:10] Today we have a real treat for you. We are going to be talking with Christy Knockleby.

Christy: [00:00:16] I am a homeschooling mother in Ontario, Canada. I was homeschooled as a teenager. I'm homeschooling my kids and I am studying and reading and I'm writing. So, I've written a couple of books. And I teach online classes for homeschoolers.

AJ: [00:00:31] My first introduction to you was your book, A Secular Bible Study. This curriculum fills a real gap for homeschoolers, particularly secular homeschoolers. Could you tell us how you came to write the book and what parents can expect if they pick it up?

Christy: [00:00:45] I was teaching online classes about Bible studies and I decided I wanted to put some of the material in book form. I was getting information for my classes from all different sources, and people would come and they'd say, they want one recommendation for a book to read. And I wouldn't know what to suggest. So I decided to write my own. It's short, it's about 130 pages long. Lessons that are sort of two to three pages long and they have little suggested activities for follow up charts and boxes within it.

[00:01:13] The main idea of the book is that families should have access to the same type of historical critical exploration of the Bible that is taught at university. It's a perspective that says that the Bible was written by human beings over a long period of time, and it was edited by other humans. The writing itself has a history and scholars can attempt to uncover that history. In looking at the Bible, we're not just looking at the

stories, but also possible explanations for why the stories were written, what ideas are promoted within different stories.

[00:01:43] I had gone to theological school, but I dropped out to have a family. I kept reading the Bible. I am fascinated by it. At one point, I wanted to offer a course on Outschool explaining the structure of the Bible. At first, I had envisioned just a one-hour class where I explained sort of a big picture of the Bible, how it starts with a pre-history and goes through the story of a family that we call the story of the patriarchs. And how it talks about that family going down to Egypt to escape a famine, and then becoming a whole nation that comes out of Egypt in what's known as the Exodus.

[00:02:12] In theological school, I was taught that there is no archaeological support for this story. It's a cultural origin myth, but it has tremendous meaning even if it isn't necessarily history. There's a period called the pre-monarchical period before they had kings, and then a time of kings, first, united kings of one kingdom, and then it splits apart into two kingdoms and the leaders are taken away into exile. And when the Persians conquered the Babylonians, they helped some of those Judean leaders reestablish the temple cult in Jerusalem and asked for the religious writings to be gathered.

[00:02:45] So I thought I would just do this class around that sort of skeleton of how the story fits together, how we can then look at how people in one period wrote about another period, like the stories of the patriarchs, were probably written during the Exilic Period of post-Exilic Period and reflect the needs of those times. But when I started teaching these classes, I discovered that people didn't have the biblical background to even make sense of that and I had to go back and start, hey, we're going to just talk about these stories separately, before we can even get into the structure.

[00:03:14] I enjoyed teaching them on Outschool. I took a break from that so that I could write the book. And now I'm back to teaching classes as well.

Jenn:

[00:03:21] I can tell you that after a lot of years of Catholic school, we never really studied the Bible. So when I started homeschooling, I knew that the Bible was of historical consequence. And I wanted my kids to be familiar with the Bible, because it's everywhere in our culture, but I didn't really have any idea where to start. And the only program that I tried was Memoria Press Christian Studies, I used the first level when my kids were really little, but I couldn't really make myself buckle down for levels two and three. And then I tried level four, which is the whole Bible in one

year, which I thought, okay, well, this is going to be more doable. But I didn't have any Bible background to teach it correctly. There weren't many notes in that and so I ended up dropping that, also. Now I have one high schooler left at home, and I still really want to do a secular Bible study with him. So, what if anything, would you recommend?

Christy:

[00:04:22] That's sort of what I tried to write my book for, so that a family could take it and study the whole Bible in a reasonable amount of time, either half a year or a year, depending on how much they put into it. I haven't looked specifically at the Memoria Press Christian Studies books, except their samples online. When I look at them, I see questions like what is dominion and who has ultimate dominion over the earth? Whom did God choose to rule the earth and all the animals in it for Him? And these are questions of faith that presume that there's a God and that the Bible accurately portrays his will, but it's a very different approach than the one I take.

[00:04:55] So if I was going to talk about the same passage in Genesis, I would be drawing attention to the verses suggesting that man and woman were created the same time and pointing out the slightly different second creation story in Genesis where man is created first and then woman is created from man. In my classes. I then contrast that with the story of Atra-Hasis, one of the Babylonian creation myths that has humans created to do some of the work after the lesser Gods rebelled against doing it. I would encourage the students to think about what that contrast means, to talk about the power of the spoken word in Genesis chapter one, where things are spoken into existence. Contrasting that with the creation myths like that of second Genesis, where humans are made from dust and rib. And I'd point out that there's a lot of ancient cultures that suggest humans are made from dust and clay. Ask students, why might that be? Why does it seem like living things are made of clay? And that's sort of the approach I take to the Bible.

AJ:

[00:05:49] There's sort of a combination of historical we might call reception, of stories and so on, mixed in with Bible as literature. And also having this constantly in the background, the broader historical context of when these stories were written, and how they interact with stories in other parts, or, close parts of the world there. Mesopotamia, and so on, which, to me is brilliant.

[00:05:49] I mean, that is actually one of my favorite ways to teach the Bible as literature, is to take some of the stories and put them up against something like the Atra-Hasis or Gilgamesh, or other things like that, and say, okay, what do we see here? What's the view of humanity that's

being shown here? What's the view of the gods or whatever that might be? How is it that civilization comes about? So those kinds of questions to me are fascinating and I think a lot of people have never really thought about reading the Bible in context that way, as literature.

Christy:

[00:06:43] To me, it makes the Bible so much more interesting and so much more meaningful. I'm not stuck on could this have happened? Or did this happen? What are they trying to say? There's so much there. There's so many different ideas and arguments being made, and different parts of the Bible contradict each other, because the authors are trying to make a slightly different point. And the contradictions don't mean that it's irrelevant or bad or inconsistent.

AJ:

[00:07:08] If you read the Bible as a conversation with many voices, because that really is what it is. There's no single author. We've got authors from all over the place, different time periods, writing, in some cases in different languages.

[00:07:20] One of the things that I've done that I've really enjoyed with trying to teach the Bible, specifically as literature, is to bring in a picture of a page of the Talmud, where you have this little [unclear] and I don't know if you're familiar with what that looks like. The typography is very interesting. A little paragraph or even just a line of usually something from early rabbinic commentary, and then printed all around it in like little squares almost coming out. It's almost like a mandala. It's kind of cool.

[00:07:47] You have the commentary of various rabbis over great many centuries, commenting on that, responding to each other's comments, and so on. And this is just a very authentic way that Judaism handles growing understanding within community of a religious text.

[00:08:02] And to take that as a model and say, look, this is really what the Bible is, that we have people quoting earlier scriptures later on with different interpretations. It's this kind of muddle of voices and part of our job is to pull out what those people were trying to say. Even setting aside the whole question of is this true, simply as a text or a group of texts, it's absolutely fascinating.

Courtney:

[00:08:24] As a person with a social studies teaching certification, I find it really interesting that a lot of people who come from the public school system are like, no religion in my homeschool. No, none, because they don't teach it in public schools and I don't want to do that either.

[00:08:38] Well, actually, the National Council for the Social Studies is the national social studies teaching organization in the United States. And as part of the college career and civic life framework for teaching social studies in the United States, they recommend that religion be included. And they have six guidelines, which are: the school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional; the school strives for student awareness but does not press for student acceptance of a religion; the school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion; the school may expose students to a diversity of religious views but may not impose any particular view; the school educates about all religions, it does not promote or denigrate religion; and the school informs the students about various beliefs, it does not seek to conform the student to any particular belief.

[00:09:31] And they actually have the guidelines for teaching about religion in the K-12 public schools and it's a fundamental part of the AAR the American Academy of Religion. A religiously literate person will possess, and here's the quote, "A basic understanding of the history, central text, where applicable, beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of the world's religions and religious expressions as they arose out of and continue to shape and be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts, and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place." Which means, then, that studying the Bible like this within the social historical context is a critical part of a good education, even in the American public school system. Which I think is really interesting and often overlooked, and part of why your book, I think, Christy, is so valuable.

Christy: [00:10:29] I have been having fun, a bit, with teaching other parts of history, particularly around the sort of 16th century to 18th century. Looking at European history from that time, and what I find is I start wanting to bring in the Bible stories into that. Not promoting them, but pointing out the way in which they were used as propaganda by various kings and queens.

AJ: [00:10:53] Yeah, I think there is almost no way that you can overestimate the influence of the biblical text simply as part of European history. And then at this point, world history. You can't excise that from history and expect to get an accurate picture of what actually happened and how people understand their world. I would say the same is true of other religious beliefs, as well, but particularly for those of us living in the Americas and people in Europe, trying to pretend that it doesn't exist or

that the only thing we ever say about it is, "Isn't that benighted," is really doing a disservice to our students.

Christy: [00:11:27] It's good if we can extend our gaze and learn about the influence of other religions in other places, too. But that doesn't have to take away from studying the Bible and its influence. That should be in addition.

Jenn: [00:11:41] We're studying the ancients and we just got to Gilgamesh. Christy, what do you think? Obviously, I can start now, because I have room in our schedule. But is it important to stick the Bible with the ancients? Or is any year okay?

Christy: [00:11:53] I think the Bible is a great part of the year on the ancients. And I mean, when I think about the story of The Epic of Gilgamesh, I think, oh, there's parts in the book of Daniel that parallel with that really well, and were probably influenced by The Epic of Gilgamesh. So I would study that book together with Gilgamesh.

Jenn: [00:12:12] Okay.

Christy: [00:12:13] Although it's written a lot later, it's still useful. But like, I think that, yes, study the Bible with the ancients, but also study it with every other year.

Jenn: [00:12:23] Yeah, well, I could see that we would definitely do this for more than a year because I never really thought about it before. But although I realized it was of historical and literary importance, it didn't click with me how much of history is in the Bible. If you really look at the whole thing, like you said, about it being written over so many years. So yeah, I could really see this folding in like all four years of high school.

Christy: [00:12:45] One of the interesting things is looking at which Greek plays were written before parts of the Bible are set or written. And to sort of see the influence. There's all sorts of discussions about how much would the biblical writers have known about these Greek plays or not, but there's a few that sort of connect that the biblical writers might have known the plays. Just to know that these things were happening at the same time, I think, is really interesting.

Courtney: [00:13:10] So timelines are helpful.

Christy: [00:13:11] The timelines are helpful, yes. Anything to do with Alexander the Great, you might as well go in and acknowledge the effect of the Persian Empire, on the writing of the Bible, and on the lives of the ancient

Judeans. And then the effect of Alexander the Great, and of the Roman Empire. It's relevant to look at how the Christian images of the Roman Empire changed.

AJ: [00:13:35] I forget which gospel it is, I want to say, maybe Matthew, but I could be wrong about this. Anyway, there's a point in the story with Pilate where Pilate's wife tries to get him not to condemn Jesus. And I know there's a theory that she was inserted in there because there were some wealthy Roman matrons who converted to Christianity quite early. And this was basically a, look, we're going to give a nod to wealthy Roman matrons, and how pious and God fearing they are by having this character speak in defense of Jesus in the Gospel. Which is very, very interesting to me, the idea that that would be a concern, like we want our wealthy patrons to see themselves reflected in this text. That to me is fascinating, right there.

Jenn: [00:14:18] That falls under the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Christy: [00:14:21] So some ideas like this idea of the Roman matrons, that shows up in Roman writing of the time, too, where they talk about sort of the dangers of women getting their own ideas. Originally, the early Christians had to support women as missionaries because those were the only ones who could get into the homes of these matrons. A Christian male missionary, couldn't come and talk to these wealthy Roman women, but you could have another woman go in and help in the house and do weaving or whatever and spread Christianity that way. And so it wasn't until the Christianity became accepted more by the Roman empire that they could say, okay, now we don't need women missionaries when the men are on board.

Courtney: [00:15:02] Early Christianity as a women's movement, it is interesting. And I think it's interesting to me as well, because as somebody who loves books, I really love it when authors put in allusions to other texts, because it makes it more interesting and more interesting reading, right? And there are a lot of themes and allusions in books, especially older books, to religious stories, because it was taken for granted as a part of their everyday life. And I think that if you're brought up in a secular household without that Wednesday night Bible study at the church, for example, you lose some of that richness of texts.

[00:15:36] And perhaps sometimes, depending on what your reading, even the overall meaning can change without familiarity with these Bible stories. Which makes me say, do other people see that? That lack of

knowledge in working with students and trying to introduce them to more difficult texts.

Christy: [00:15:53] Like I said, earlier, when I offered my first Bible study class, I thought that I would be showing kids who already knew some Bible stories, how they fit together. And I discovered that a lot of the students had never heard the names of Noah or Moses or David or Paul. But after that, I've designed my classes with the idea that at least half the students will be starting from scratch and that's okay. I think there is an absence of knowledge about those. I don't know, like AJ, you might know with teaching other stuff where it shows up in other classes. Is there a lack of knowledge about the Bible?

AJ: [00:16:24] I would say, where I've seen it more is in teaching literature, generally, English literature. It's really pretty impossible to get through anything that was written much before the 20th century and not run into a biblical reference. Again, just as Courtney said, it's the lingua franca. It's a pervasive awareness that people used the references that everybody knew. Today, we might compare that to, on the literary level, fables, you know, we say that we talk about sour grapes, or we say, don't be a dog in the manger, things like that. Well, okay, that's all Aesop. And for people who don't know those stories, they're going to miss those references. This is cultural literacy. This is exactly what we mean and what E.D. Hirsch meant when he talked about cultural literacy. If you don't have these reference points, you're going to miss the point of a lot what's going on around you.

Courtney: [00:17:11] So do you have any favorite pieces of literature that you like to assign when you read the Bible?

Christy: [00:17:17] I like to assign excerpts from Lord Byron's play, Cain. It's a fascinating interpretation of the story of Cain and Abel. And it got a lot of criticism when it first came out, because it kind of makes Cain sympathetic. The King's Mirror is actually a Norwegian text. And it's one of the genre of mirrors, which were sort of reflection pieces where you're supposed to look at the Bible and see how it teaches you things. And the King's Mirror that I like is a Norwegian text from about 1000 years ago, that is about teaching the kings how to live. And it's got all sorts of commentary and interpretation of Adam and Eve and other Bible stories. But it also fits in with sort of a transferring of power from people believing that justice should be revenge, that the family seek justice for their own wrongs to saying the court and the king should make these decisions. And so I like it for looking at how a later group of people interpreted the Bible stories and applied to them to their own situations.

[00:18:17] So there's a couple of texts that I like to use when I'm talking about Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament in general. And one of them is actually a play by Euripides. And it was written long before Acts of the Apostles was written. But there's interesting parallels in it that make it a good contrast. Because in the play Bacchae, there's a guy traveling and he's actually a god in disguise, who wants his cult to be recognized.

[00:18:40] And he goes and he sort of causes chaos in the city that the king doesn't want to recognize him but the women do. And so you have that image of the women, the Roman matrons we were talking about earlier, where in this case, it's the Greek matrons practicing their own religion. And there's parallels with the Acts of the Apostles, like he escapes from prison miraculously. There's this accusation he's upsetting the natural order. So even though it was written long before Paul, I think the story of Paul was shaped by the conversation earlier about women's role in religion and about whether cults need to be recognized by the king and the sort of imposed from above or growing separate. And to what extent cults influence or upset the natural order. All of that would have been dealt with by the early Christians.

AJ: [00:19:24] What are you teaching now? And what do you most like to teach? And what are you planning to teach?

Christy: [00:19:29] Right now I'm teaching a class through ThinkersMeetUp, which is a British group. It is about Minecraft. In Minecraft, redstone is the equivalent of electricity, you can stretch out lines of it, and you can turn them on or off using levers, buttons, blocks, torches. You can make logic gates like a NOT gate where if your line is on what comes out, the other side will be off and vice versa, AND gates and NOR gates and XOR gates. And so with this, you can start manipulating binary numbers. So I teach a class where you build an adding machine that can add binary numbers together. And then we do a second machine that uses a double dabble algorithm to convert those binary numbers to decimal numbers.

Courtney: [00:20:07] Well, that's just super neat.

Christy: [00:20:08] I have a pirate class. It's a 15 week long pirate class dealing with pirates and world history. And basically, at one point, my son said, let's study pirates, but not their lifestyle, but why they went to sea. And I said, oh, great idea. And then I spent three years on it. It became a game. Let's see how many events from the 16th to 18th century, we can connect with piracy. And so many world events connect with piracy in some way. At one point, I was hoping to publish a book on it, but I've just never found the energy to edit down my 400-page manuscript.

AJ: [00:20:38] Well, hopefully at some point you will, because that sounds absolutely fascinating. That's just great.

Christy: [00:20:44] So I have those and then I have my Bible study courses. I have a handful of oddball courses on Tutor.

Jenn: [00:20:50] So can you tell me about your secular Bible study book? Like if I buy that is that going to be enough for me to teach this on my own?

Christy: [00:20:57] That is the goal.

Jenn: [00:20:58] Okay.

Christy: [00:20:59] If there's something missing, please contact me about it, because I would love to answer your questions and add to it in the next edition.

[00:21:06] My goal was that the book would be something where families could go through it one or two lessons a week, pausing whenever they want to dig deeper in things.

AJ: [00:21:13] I happen to know a secret about you, Christy, which is that you are studying Assyrian. The language geek in me loves this. And I would love to know why Assyrian and how it is that you've gone about creating a plan of study for yourself. If you could also give some advice to other people, other adults, who are autodidacts who really want to learn something interesting like Assyrian, but are really overwhelmed trying to figure out how to start?

Christy: [00:21:37] The Assyrian is actually a bit of a funny thing. I kind of stumbled into it. I had started watching a YouTube channel called Digital Hammurabi, which teaches how to read Sumerian. And so I started learning how to read Sumerian and discovered that a lot of texts that are connected with Sumerian are also connected with Assyrian and that there's more written in Assyrian. It's Assyrian, or Babylonian sort of became the lingua franca of the ancient Middle East. So when the Hittites were corresponding with the Egyptians, they did it in a variation of Assyrian.

[00:22:05] So the other sort of thing that got me into this was that I had ordered a book. It's about the Bible, and it talks about new ways of translating Hebrew words based on the comparisons with the Assyrian. I ordered the book and realized I can't understand much of it, I need to learn more of either Hebrew or Assyrian. I started working on it, I have a couple of core grammar books that I'm working through. And I have a

language app on my phone, which works great for keeping me off Facebook. It's called Memrize. The idea is that individuals can submit their own lists. So it doesn't include Assyrian in the official listings. But in the unofficial ones, you can find people's lists of Assyrian words. There's a big encyclopedia set that's called the Chicago Assyrian dictionary. You can buy the individual books for \$100 per letter, or the whole thing is available online. So you just download, these are the words that start with A. It has not just the word, but then it has samples of the word in sentences. And so I just sit there and I copy those sentences out.

AJ: [00:23:06] That's great.

Christy: [00:23:08] It's the Assyrian version of the OED. And with my advice for people studying anything. First of all, it's to carve up time for that, because as a parent, it's so easy to think that I can't study unless I get the dishes done, the laundry folded, I play games with my kids, etc, etc. And I have to say, no, I can do some of that. But I also have to study. Studying is not optional. Another thing I do is I love colored markers and report covers. So I buy those little things to use for my own studying just as I would for the kids.

AJ: [00:23:35] Excellent. In addition to that, as if that were not enough, you're also a novelist. Can you tell us about your novel *The Edge of the Circle*?

Christy: [00:23:43] I was a homeschooling teenager in a small town and I just sort of wanted to write and capture a sort of snapshot of that time period. *The Edge of the Circle* is fiction. I wanted to show quirky teenagers wrestling with big questions like forgiveness and standing up for oneself and shifting religious beliefs. And I wanted to portray some of the fun and freedom that comes in homeschooling. I wanted to offer a book that could show that sort of alternative image of teenagehood for quirky, weird homeschoolers to see themselves in.

AJ: [00:24:10] We're going to have links in the show notes that will lead you to where you can follow Christy online and get her books.

Christy: [00:24:18] Thank you so much for visiting. This has been a lot of fun.

AJ: [00:24:20] Well, thank you so much for joining us.

Courtney: [00:24:22] Yes, I really appreciate you coming and sharing your knowledge.

[00:24:26] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschoolers. If you found this episode helpful, show us some love by leaving us a review wherever you get your podcasts. And join us next time when we'll be bringing you more real talk about homeschooling.