

6 BIBLE LITERACY

One of the themes of *The Bible in America*, and more generally of Barna’s recent work, is that Americans increasingly minimize external sources of authority, such as institutions and religious texts, as they determine how life ought to be lived. Within this changing context, how familiar are people with the Bible’s background, people, stories and principles? In each year of American Bible Society’s “The State of the Bible” research, Barna asks U.S. adults about the Bible’s contents in order to gauge their biblical literacy.

Here is one example: Survey respondents were presented four statements and asked to identify the phrase that comes directly from the Bible.

- The truth will set you free.
- To thine own self be true.
- God helps those who help themselves.
- God works in mysterious ways.

Only 24 percent of adults were able to correctly identify “The truth will set you free” as a direct quote from the Bible. Instead, most others incorrectly selected the following phrases: “God works in mysterious ways” (36%); “To thine own self be true” (17%); and “God helps those who help themselves” (13%).

A combined majority of Americans believes the three latter statements are direct quotes from the Bible and, interestingly, the sentiment of these phrases points to the morality of self-fulfillment. As indicated in the Introduction, millions of adults (including many practicing Christians) believe the best way to find yourself is to look within yourself—so it is little wonder that self-oriented, feel-good phrases would wrongly be categorized as holy writ. Part of the Christian community’s focus in the coming years must be a reorientation toward the Scriptures as a filter for our lives, rather than trusting ourselves as a filter for understanding

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the Scriptures. This need is a wide-open window of opportunity for leaders concerned with helping people engage with the Bible.

Barna’s study of biblical literacy also reveals that most Americans retain some level of familiarity with the Bible. This does not mean that they understand the implications of the Scriptures for their lives—or even that they are familiar with the document itself (for example, only one-quarter knows the New Testament was originally written in Greek).

When it comes to some of the basic elements, however, millions of Americans retain “muscle memory” of the Bible. A majority of Americans, for example, is able to correctly identify the first book in the Bible as Genesis. Most know that the “3” in John 3:16 refers to the chapter reference. More than half know the apostle Paul was also known as Saul, and most are also able to correctly identify the biblical book named after a woman (Esther). Just fewer than half are able to identify the names of the first five books of the Bible.

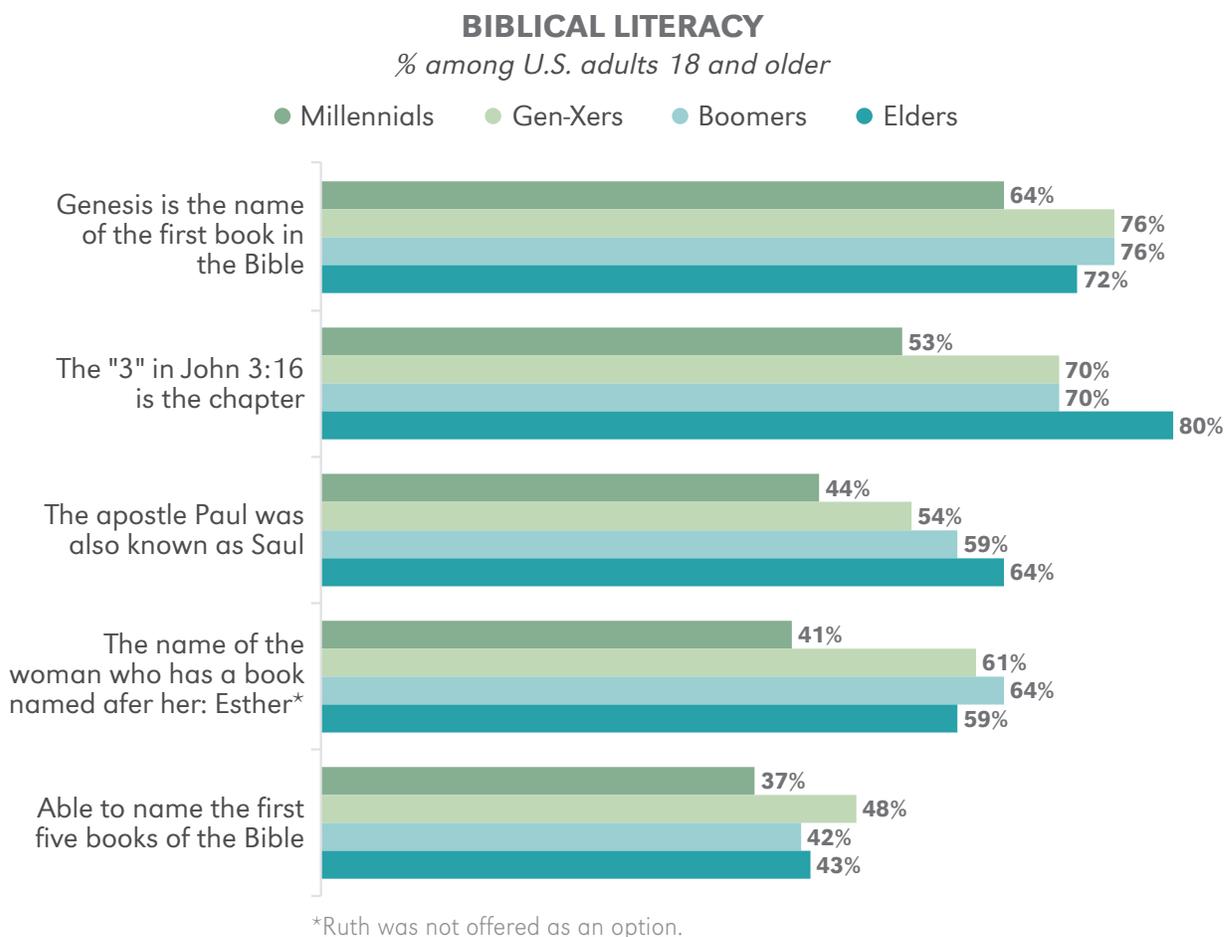
Furthermore, Americans remain confident that some of the most amazing stories in the Bible can be taken at face value. This is a slight twist on Bible literacy; it’s not just whether people *know* the stories of the Bible, but whether they *believe* they actually happened. Survey respondents were asked if they thought a specific story in the Bible was “literally true, meaning it happened exactly as described in the Bible” or whether they thought the story was “meant to illustrate a principle but is not to be taken literally.” Several well-known Bible stories were then offered for consideration.

Surprisingly, the most significant Bible story of all—“the story of Jesus Christ rising from the dead, after being crucified and buried”—is also the most widely embraced. Three out of four adults say they interpreted that narrative literally (75%), while only one out of five said they did not (19%). This is remarkable. Although millions who believe in the fact of the Resurrection may not understand how to connect the dots to their daily lives, the Bible’s record of these events powerfully resonates with them even today. The window of believability is still open for millions of people.

The account of the prophet Daniel surviving in the lion’s den is deemed literally true by two-thirds of adults (65%). Two out of three Americans believe that Moses literally parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape from the Egyptians (64%). The Bible says the young shepherd David killed a giant warrior, Goliath, with stones and a slingshot; nearly two-thirds of Americans accept that story as accurate (63%). These findings are evidence that belief in the supernatural and miracles endures, and that the Bible’s culture-shaping influence remains strong in America.

Despite these favorable realities, Bible literacy is in decline among younger adults. They are less likely to have the “muscle memory” of Bible knowledge. As the chart shows, Millennials score lower

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than older adults on each of the literacy questions. This highlights one of the consistent themes of *The Bible in America* research: The sacred canopy of the Scriptures does not provide as much shade to the younger generations of Americans, especially the Millennials.

PRACTICING CHRISTIANS

BIBLICAL LITERACY WITHIN THE CHURCH

Younger generations of practicing Christians keep pace with older adults.

	% ALL PRACTICING CHRISTIANS	% MILLENNIALS	% GEN-XERS	% BOOMERS	% ELDERS
Genesis is the name of first book in Bible	88	80	90	89	85
The “3” in John 3:16 is the chapter	77	70	81	80	65
Identify book named after a woman: Esther*	75	59	79	79	67
The name of Abraham’s son was Isaac	71	68	76	72	62
The apostle Paul was also known as Saul	69	68	62	72	75
The original language of Old Testament is Hebrew	65	62	67	65	62
The first five books of Bible correctly named	60	60	70	59	49
The name of King David’s son was Solomon	58	60	64	56	49
The name of John the Baptist’s mother: Elizabeth	46	30	41	53	49
Identify statement found in Bible: The truth will set you free	38	40	42	39	33
The original language of New Testament is Greek	37	31	42	37	31

*Ruth was not offered as an option.