Biblical Literacy: The Most Important People, Events, and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible by Joseph Telushkin

As he did so brilliantly in his bestselling book, Jewish Literacy, Joseph Telushkin once again mines a subject of Jewish history and religion so richly that his book becomes an inspiring companion and a fundamental reference. In Biblical Literacy, Telushkin turns his attention to the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Old Testament), the most influential series of books in human history. Along with the Ten Commandments, the Bible's most famous document, no piece of legislation ever enacted has influenced human behavior as much as the biblical injunction to Love your neighbor as yourself. No political tract has motivated human beings in so many diverse societies to fight for political freedom as the Exodus story of God's liberation of the Israelite slaves—which shows that God intends that, ultimately, people be free.
The Bible's influence, however, has conveyed as much through its narratives as its laws. Its timeless and moving tales about the human condition and man's relationship to God have long shaped Jewish and Christian notions of morality, and continue to stir the conscience and imagination of believers and skeptics alike.

There is a universality in biblical stories:

The murder of Abel by his brother Cain is a profound tragedy of sibling jealousy and family love gone awry (see pages 11-14).

Abraham's challenge to God to save the lives of the evil people of Sodom is a fierce drama of man in confrontation with God, suggesting the human right to contend with the Almighty when it is feared He is acting unjustly (see pages 32-34).

Jacob's deception of his blind father, Isaac raises the timeless question: Do the ends justify the means when the fate of the world is at stake (see pages 46-55).

Encyclopedia in scope, but dynamic and original in its observations and organization, Biblical Literacy makes available in one volume the Bible's timeless stories of love, deceit, and the human condition; its most important laws and ideas; and an annotated listing of all 613 laws of the Torah for both layman and professional, there is no other reference work or interpretation of the Bible quite like this Stunning volume.

Personal Review: Biblical Literacy: The Most Important People, Events, and Ideas of the Hebrew Bible by Joseph Telushkin

I've seen the Hebrew Bible explained by true believers of several kinds, or critics of various sorts. But never have I seen it examined with such open curiosity. With Rabbi Telushkin as a guide, I was struck as never before by the Bible's painful honesty. It faithfully records the pain of inhumanity and the cost of each moral victory. But I seem to need an unblinking guide like Telushkin to really expose this.

The book takes three passes through the Hebrew Bible. First Telushkin highlights people and events. Then he explores the development of values and ideas. Third he details the rise of Jewish law through the Torah. I want to give quotes from two of these sections.

In examining Genesis 22, Telushkin considers how Isaac and Sarah felt about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son:

"Does he [Isaac] have trouble trusting his father after this incident? Or trusting God?"
And then there is Sarah. The woman has waited almost her entire life to have a child, and Isaac's birth was her supreme joy. Yet her name is not mentioned once in this chapter. How does she react when she hears what happened? Do Abraham and Isaac tell her, or do they make a pact to keep the incident secret?

Again, we do not know, although the late Rabbi Abraham Chen points out a peculiar, seldom noted detail in the text. When Abraham returns from his trip, the Bible notes that he stays in Beersheva. Yet the second verse in the next chapter (Genesis 23:2) records that Sahah died in Kiryat Arba, and that Abraham came there to mourn for her. Although the text never explicitly says so, the implication is that Abraham and Sarah were living apart when she died. If so, did Sarah move away from him when she heard what Abraham had almost done?" (p. 41)

Concerning the development of values in the Bible story, we have this concerning the problem of theft:

"... The Bible's primary concern, however, is with aiding the victim. The first demand it makes of a thief is that he return the stolen goods to the victim. In addition, the thief is to be punished with a hundred percent fine, payable to the victim, not the state (Exodus 22:3). ... It is evident that biblical law is primarily concerned not with punishment of the thief, but with gaining restitution for the victim." (p. 447-448)