

***THE JEWELLED ASTROLABE* — Family Discussion Guide**

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Before you begin: This work is long overdue and only just began. I release this discussion guide now, even though it is very much in progress, because of the need to help parents now whose children may be grown before I complete my Christian Reader's Guide.

When we commissioned four historical novels that would allow me to compare and contrast each of the major world religions to Christianity, I was a bit taken aback by the author's treatment of Christianity during the Middle Ages. But I am very glad that my husband and I pressed ahead with publishing *The Jeweled Astrolabe*. The book gives me a forum to not only teach about the differences between Christians, Jews and Muslims; it also provides a platform for pushing into the differences that exist within the Christian church.

I was recently told that in modern day Jerusalem the Christians there, who include Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, share tremendous unity between themselves. Why? Because they recognize that the enemy of the Gospel is their Islamic foe, not other Christian believers. In the West, though we are slowly waking up to this reality after centuries of fighting within the Christian church, we still have a long way to go. This discussion guide for *The Jeweled Astrolabe* addresses at many points the Christian's need to build unity with other believers whose practices, and some of whose teachings, vary from our own.

While this guide is written largely with a Protestant audience in mind, it is my hope that Catholic families will use it as well, and share with us ways that the perspectives here can be broadened further for the purpose of building up the body of Christ in love.

The Jeweled Astrolabe gives us such important things to discuss. I believe this discussion is valuable enough to engage in despite the many deficiencies in this current version. All suggestions on how to improve it are fully welcome.

Parent instructions before you begin:

Below you will find discussion questions that correspond with most chapters of *The Jeweled Astrolabe*. By the time you get to chapter ten you will find a series of questions that will have you discussing the book's content long after you have finished the story.

Please complete the reading of the chapter before discussing any of the specific questions. You may also find it helpful to read my February, 2015 Newsletter about *The Jeweled Astrolabe* which is available at www.brimwoodpress.com [here](#). It was written in response to concerns about the negative portrayal of Christians in *The Jeweled Astrolabe*.

It helps parents understand the wisdom associated with teaching our children about the reality that Christians do bad things.

The following comments below each question are not meant as comprehensive answers, but are intended to aid the parent/teacher in facilitating discussion regarding *The Jeweled Astrolabe*. For many of the questions, biblical passages are provided. I generally recommend having students attempt to answer questions before reading the accompanying verses as this both engages students actively in the discussion and enables both them and you to recognize areas of deficiencies in their learning. This also applies to the teaching comments and questions found in the “Things to Consider” sections. Always have students engage the questions as best they can before receiving further input from you, the guide or the Bible.

The Jeweled Astrolabe Discussion Guide

1. Chapter 1.

Did you like al-Jady, the Islamic doctor, and his son, Nizar? Why or why not? Were they doing good? Can non-Christians do good things? Why or why not?

Things to consider: *Is healing the sick a good thing? Is showing friendship and kindness to others a good thing? Can non-Christians do the above things? Have you or your family ever experienced help, healing, or kindness from someone who doesn't know Jesus? What is the ultimate source of any goodness found in human beings? (Genesis 1:26-27)*

2. Chapter 2, page 17.

The Almoravids enforce Islamic law based on Islamic beliefs, even on people of other faiths, such as Jews and Christians. Should the Jews and Christians obey those laws? Why or why not?

Things to consider: *For help answering this question, read Mark 12:14-17 and Romans 13:1-7. Under what circumstances should Christians disobey their government? Read Daniel 3:8-18 and Daniel 6:1-23.*

3. Chapter 2, page 18.

Many Jews and Mozarabs (Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity) fled Cordoba rather than live under Islamic law. Others refused to leave their ancient homeland, and chose instead to stay and continue to practice their own religion despite the danger. What do you think motivated those who left and those who stayed?

Things to consider: *Leaving Cordoba: fear, protection of children, desiring to live under a government of their same religion. Staying in Cordoba: Responsibility for elderly parents who cannot travel, livelihoods tied to the region, health concerns, lack of*

finances for travel, conviction to stand against a government non-Muslims disagreed with.

Sometimes people are faced with very difficult decisions which do not have an absolute right or wrong choice for everyone. Do you think this situation in the Jeweled Astrolabe might be an example of such a circumstance? How might the Bible's warning against judging others be important in such circumstances?

4. Chapter 2, page 20.

Mira, the slave, is a Christian, not a Jew, yet she receives the Sabbath blessing from Solomon, and happily hums along with the Sabbath song. Should she do these things? Why or why not? Does her participation in the Jewish Sabbath ritual signify disloyalty to Jesus Christ?

***Things to consider:** People's religious beliefs and practices are a reflection of their desire to know and serve the true God, even if the fulfillment of that quest in Jesus Christ has not yet been discovered. People's religious practices should always be treated with respect. When visiting the home of someone of another faith, a Christian should seek not to give offense, and follow his own conscience as long as a certain practice does not clearly contradict with worship of and obedience to Jesus Christ. See Romans 14:20-21 and 1 Cor. 9:19-23.*

5. Chapter 3, pp. 30-31

How does Nahum display prejudice? How does Solomon combat Nahum's prejudiced statement? If you heard someone express prejudice toward a certain person or group of people, how would you respond?

***Things to consider:** Solomon combated Nahum's prejudiced statement with a patient explanation of the reasons for Christians' lack of higher learning. He reminds Nahum that the political systems people live under impact their ability to gain an education. (Consider Muslim girls in Afghanistan today.)*

***Note:** After the demise of King Charles (Charlemagne), the feudal system ruled much of Western Europe during the period in which this novel is set. Feudalism created a large peasant class that did not have access to education. As the vast majority in Western Europe were Christians this would account for Nahum's generalization about the lack of knowledge of Christians. Nevertheless, their ignorance was the result of the form of government they toiled under not Christian belief. (Remember that when a new era of learning took hold in the West during the Italian Renaissance, it was Christian monasteries that preserved and provided the intellectual treasures of the Greek, Roman and Christian worlds.)*

Based on the lack of learning of many people who lived during the Middle Ages, what does this time period reveal both about the importance of education and a stable, just government?

6. Chapter 3, pp. 34-35

Solomon Zafrani is asked by the soldiers to hurry to the palace on the Jewish Sabbath, but he refuses to go. Why? How might you respond if someone in authority over you (a coach, a teacher, a boss at work) asked you to do something that went against your beliefs?

***Things to consider:** Solomon believed that refusing to work on the Sabbath was obedient and honoring to God. What commandment was he keeping? See Exodus 20:8-11 See also above question #2 and the biblical references from Daniel.*

7. Chapter 4, pp. 46-47

In the description of the behavior of Templar knights who belonged to a Christian monastic order of monks, how do you respond to the knowledge that some people do terrible things in Christ's name? Why might some Christians do such things?

***Things to consider:** Human sin nature, insincere faith, lack of understanding of Christ's teachings, false teaching, temptation of both our flesh and the devil, and the impact of the corrupting influence of power upon human beings.*

Can you think of examples from the Old and New Testament where God's people committed terrible sins? Why does the Bible include such awful deeds committed by Old and New Testament believers? How can such stories be instructive in our lives?

If we found ourselves faced with the same temptations, do we know that we wouldn't fall into any of the gross sins recorded in Scripture, let alone what historians record about the Templar Knights?

Recognizing the battles that Christians must wage against their own sin nature and the attacks of the evil one, how should we respond when confronted with other people's sin? What are godly and ungodly responses to other people's sin?

What are godly and ungodly responses to our own sin? (The following passages may be helpful as you unpack these questions with your children. I would repeat the question regarding a godly response before reading aloud each new passage.)

***Read Galatians 6:1,2; James 5:19,20; Matthew 18:15-17; 1Corinthians 3:1-3; Psalm 51**[make sure you note that the context of this prayer is David's sin with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. Also note that despite these sins he is still called a "man after God's own heart." Do you think his repentance had anything to do with that fact?]*

Optional Investigation for Older Students (8th grade and above): Judging the sins of others (Parents may wish to save this whole activity until after the book is finished.)

*Over the course of a lifetime we will all be presented with news about another person's sin in which we will need to discern whether or not the person is truly guilty. **Read 1Timothy 5:19; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16.** Why is the Bible so concerned that people who are accused of a terrible crime or sin are convicted by more*

than one person? Can you think of examples from history where it is likely that someone or a group of people were falsely accused? Name some reasons for false accusations. (Parents: If you have studied the Salem Witch Trials this would be a good example to bring up.)

The Jeweled Astrolabe brings up a very interesting situation for discussion. When an author of historical fiction writes a story, his research may uncover conflicting views about the history of the time he is writing about. Historical fiction writers frequently have to choose which source they will base their tale upon.

The historical records that the author of The Jeweled Astrolabe relied on did not paint the Templar Knights or the Crusades in a positive light. There are many historical accounts that emphasize the same unsavory deeds done by Crusaders. Many of these are recounted in The Jeweled Astrolabe.

The question for the reader is, “Were these charges brought against the whole group of crusaders called Templars by and large accurate?” To make a judgment about this, you have to investigate viewpoints opposing the one represented in The Jeweled Astrolabe.

Here are some websites that will provide a very different accounting of the events that led to the complete discrediting and even execution of many Templar Knights:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/10/12/us-vatican-templars-idUSL093422320071012>
<http://www.catholic.com/magazine/articles/the-sad-history-of-the-knights-templar>

Note to Parents: Please carefully read the second site before exposing your children to this information. You may want to copy the information from both sites into a word document. Depending on the age and innocence of your children, there is material contained on-line that you may wish to edit out. If you do so you can simply print the material for your students.

Deleting material about the charges of homosexual activities levied against the Templar Knights will not detract from the value of reading this perspective on their trial. The goal is to help your children learn about developing discernment both with historical information and situations in which they will hear rumors about other people.

Things to consider as you read:

In reading material that presents a very different perspective of historical events involving the Crusades, what would you conclude about the charges, confessions and sentencing of Templar Knights?

Without discounting the possibility that Templar Knights were guilty of some or all of the charges made against them, what ugly motives could the powerful people involved in the trials have had for creating false or trumped up charges? Were the methods used to extract confessions from Templar Knights just? Should such confessions be trusted as reliable and reflective of truth?

According to Matthew 18, how should accusation against Christians be handled? Why does the Bible say that accusations against Church leaders always need two to three witnesses?

What did you learn about history from this exercise? What did you learn about judging others based on things you have not witnessed first hand?

8. Chapter 4, pp. 48-49

What do you think of the relationship between al-Jady and Solomon? Are they compromising their religions by associating so closely together? Why or why not? They share in the education of one another's children. Is this a good idea, or could it be harmful? Why or why not?

Things to consider: Do you have any family members or classmates who don't know Jesus? What good things might result from you spending time with such people? What bad things might result? If you have neighbors from India who are Hindu, would it be wrong for the mother or father to help you with a math problem? What about a Bible question?

9. Chapter 7, page 88

Gavriel believes his Uncle Baruch was reckless in educating his daughter, Shifra, because it caused her to be discontent with a girl's lot in life. He thinks it would have been better not to educate her. Given that a girl in the 12th Century had no opportunities to use her education professionally, do you agree with Gavriel? Why or why not?

Things to consider: How might Shifra have used her education in positive ways within her own home? What personal benefits would she have gained from her education? What benefits might she have been able to pass on to others throughout her life?

10. Chapter 7, page 90

The Swedes, Tarn and Sigurd, blend Christianity with pagan religious practices. Why might they do this? What differences do you see between the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the Norsemen's pagan beliefs?

Things to consider: Thor was one of many gods worshipped by pagan Norsemen. The day of summer solstice was considered an auspicious day and to celebrate it, Tarn and Sigurd chose to honor the god of their choice. Thus, Norse pagans worshiped many gods and revered nature. The monotheistic religions worship only one God, and nature is viewed as a creation to be cared for, not an object of worship.

Read Genesis 2:5,15;3:17-19 What job is man given before and after the fall? How was the creation impacted by man's disobedience? What can man learn by caring for the

soil? In what ways is God's creation intended to be our teacher? How should we treat teachers? (We do not worship a teacher, but we do show _____ (respect) to people and created things that help us _____ (learn).

Read Romans 1:18-25 According to this passage what is the creation intended to teach us? When people refuse to learn from the creation, which points to the Creator, what happens to those people? This first chapter of Romans provides a long list of the de-humanizing effects of placing people and other created things above God. Try to identify ten negative results.

In our world, most people don't sacrifice squirrels on pagan high holy days. How does worshipping what God created rather than God Himself express itself in our culture?

People are commanded to obey and worship God alone. Is the reason for this command solely because God is honored by our worship? If God is not worshipped by man, who or what else will worship God? **Read Isaiah 6:2-4; Luke 19:37-40; Revelation 4:7-9** Who is most impacted by the failure to worship God?

Romans 1 emphasizes the wrath of God. If you were a parent and your children were doing things that were literally destroying themselves, would you be angry? Why?

Summarize: Why is it wrong to worship nature?

11. Chapter 8, page 101

The Muslim in Uncle Reuven's acted-out story play accuses Christians of believing in three gods, instead of one God. Why does he think this? Is he correct in his accusation? Why or why not?

Things to consider: Christians believe that God the Father, God the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit are one God. Muslims could easily mistake this belief in what Christians call the Trinity as a belief in three separate gods. However, at the core of Christian Trinitarian belief is the affirmation that God is one God: one in essence, yet three distinct Persons.

Read the Nicene Creed. (You can find it on-line if you don't have a copy of it at home.)

Research: When was the Nicene Creed written? Why was it written? What false teaching (non-Christian beliefs called heresy) was it refuting? What modern religion(s) does not believe that Jesus Christ is equal and co-eternal with the Father, and yet still claims to be a Christian faith?

12. Chapter 9, page 126

What was Garin's motivation to join the Crusades?

Note: the word “Infidel” refers to a person who does not accept a particular faith; an unbeliever. (During the Crusades, both Christians and Muslims used the term to describe each other).

***Things to consider:** What was he promised by the Pope? If you are growing up in a Protestant home, rather than a Catholic one, it is very difficult to understand why the Pope would tell people that crusading would influence their eternal destiny. There are plenty of verses in the Bible that you could use to disagree with the Pope’s claim made during the era of the Crusades. But one of the goals of education is learning how to work through differences with others, which always requires striving to understand the other person’s point of view.*

Before I worked on this guide, I did not understand very much about Catholic Christianity. But I visited some Catholic websites and this is what I learned about how going on a Crusade could be important in a person’s salvation:

Crusading was an act of penance. Penance is a visible demonstration of repentance for evil deeds through acts of self-denial or goodness. In the Catholic view, penance, a word which is often used interchangeably with repentance, is necessary for salvation.

*Can you think of any verses in the Bible that talks about people’s repentance being involved in their salvation? There are actually a lot of them, especially in the Gospels and Acts. In Acts, repentance is generally paired with baptism. Just look up repentance in a concordance or on the Web. Or here are a few to get you started: **Read Isaiah 59:20; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 2:38;20:21.** You will find many verses that link repentance with salvation, just like the many verses that link faith with salvation, and others that link baptism with salvation.*

I am pointing this out not to confuse you, but to help you see that the Bible talks about a lot of things that are involved in God’s work of saving people. But somehow different groups of Christians, Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, have different understandings about what actually saves people. Each group’s perspective on salvation has biblical support. Now we can argue all day long about who has more verses to support their views on salvation, but how many times does God have to say something for it to be true?

The truth is we belong to a Christian Church that has sadly been divided over things like “What saves us?” I may not agree with the Pope that crusading was a ticket to heaven, but I do agree that repentance and faith are both necessary for salvation. What do you think?

If you believe that salvation is by faith alone, would you conclude that I am not a Christian? Who is the judge? Who actually saves us?

Thinking more about the Pope's promise from the perspective of the Bible, I need to ask again, could God have credited an act of crusading for righteousness?

Recently, I was reading the Psalms and came across these verses in Psalm 106:29-31:

Thus they provoked Him to anger with their deeds, And the plague broke out among them. Then Phinehas stood up and interposed, And so the plague was stayed. And it was reckoned to him for righteousness, To all generations forever....

Who do you think I was reminded of? Yes, Abraham when he believed that God would fulfill His promise to make him a great nation, and it (his belief) was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Of course, most of us are very familiar with this verse because Paul quotes it in Romans 4:3. In the verse from the Psalm above, Phinehas too is credited with righteousness, but what exactly for is not as clear.

Read Numbers 25. *What did Phinehas, a priest and son of Aaron, do? Do you agree that this was a much different action than believing God? But both Abraham's belief and Phinehas' violent act of judgment against God's enemies were credited as righteousness. After reading this passage, can you make any connections with the Crusades and what Phinehas did? If so, what?*

I can make arguments for the Crusades in light of this passage, but I'm still not convinced that crusading saved. Nevertheless, I recognize that after just a little research into the Catholic teaching about penance and a wider study of the Bible than Paul's writings, the Pope may have understood things that I do not. Even still, it is possible that the Pope may have taken an application of this passage of Scripture too far. But only God can judge the motives and soundness of the Pope's claim, and the hearts of Crusaders who went to fight against the enemies of Christ's church.

After reading and discussing this, why should we care about what long-dead popes and Crusaders said and did? Christians have been using these events to judge and condemn one another's actions and beliefs for a very long time. Should we continue this trend?

While the Bible can be interpreted on some issues in very different ways, there is no getting around the truth that I am called to love my brothers and sisters in Christ. It seems that this would hold true for loving Christians who worship God in different ways. Part of loving one another is striving to understand our differences rather than standing in judgment by proclaiming that certain kinds of "supposed Christians are going to hell." I grew up in churches that taught that very thing about Catholics, and I am ashamed today to acknowledge that I believed that teaching for many years. My belief was based on ignorance and prejudice. I was unwittingly caught up in a centuries-old squabble in the Western Church about what saves us.

The result of "this crusade" has not borne good fruit. Some might argue that the divisions in the Western Church have done as much damage to the name of Christ as damage done by the Crusades. If there is any merit to such a claim, then we all have reason, both Protestant and Catholic, to be humble and repent.

Read John 17:13-26: *What actions, behaviors or beliefs could help promote the unity in Christ's Church that Jesus prayed for shortly before he went to the cross? Why is unity in the Church important? What can you do to promote love between believers?*

13. Chapter 10, page 129

Gavriel wonders how he can have faith when God doesn't appear to be keeping His promises. Have you ever felt this way? What would you say to Gavriel if you were with him in the forest?

Things to consider: *Abraham believed God, even though he never saw the fulfillment of God's promises to him. Read Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:3 Why did God call Abraham a righteous man? Is it possible that when we don't see an answer to prayer, that God is still at work? How might difficult circumstances serve a good purpose in our lives or in God's plan?*

Read Hebrews 11 and identify how many of those heroes actually saw the fulfillment of God's promises?

14. Chapter 3, pages 37, and Chapter 10, pages 132 and 138

In the Jewish religion, "Mitzvah" or doing good deeds is extremely important. How important is "doing good" in the Christian faith?

Things to consider: *Did Jesus value doing good deeds and helping others? See Mark 3:1-6, Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 25:37-40, Revelation 19:7-8. How does Mitzvah relate to the commandment that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves? See Mark 12:31.*

Note to parents: *The BrimWood Press newsletter for February, 2015 deals directly with this question at length. Please refer to it for additional material.*

15. Chapter 10, page 137

Robert sobs as he tells of his good intentions in becoming a Crusader. He wonders how the whole endeavor, which started out as a just cause, degenerated into evil and cruelty. His sorrow and regret is the first step toward what?

Things to consider: *Though an earlier discussion in this guide attempted to provide some balance to a book that paints the Crusades in a flatly negative light, there were undoubtedly individual Crusaders who had plenty to repent for. In the story, Robert clearly belongs to this group despite the nobility of his original intentions. Have you ever tried to do something good only to realize that your actions or words produced the exact opposite result?*

Beyond his sobs, how does Robert demonstrate true repentance? Read page 138. What good did Robert do for Gavriel? In what ways are mitzvah, penance and repentance alike?

Read Luke 19:1-10: How does Zaccheus demonstrate true repentance, mitzvah and penance? What does Jesus say is the result of Zaccheus' response?

16. Chapter 10, page 145

Muslims call Jews and Christians “People of the Book” (dhimmi) because all three religions have a common origin in the Hebrew Scriptures. Which common ancestor do all three faiths share?

Read Genesis 16:1-15, Matthew 1:1-2, Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 17:18-21

17. Chapter 10, page 145

How does Peter of Cluny demonstrate a sincere desire to obey God and honor his Lord Jesus Christ?

He wants to learn about Islam for the purpose of understanding the way Muslims think in order to better share Christ with them. This is in direct obedience to Christ's command to “preach the gospel to every creature.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

Do you think reading the Koran in order to achieve this goal is a good idea? Why or why not?

***Things to consider:** Many missionaries today study the foreign culture and religions to which they are sent in order to build relationship for the purpose of sharing Christ. Are there any examples in Scripture that demonstrate the importance of learning about other people's religions? **See Acts 17:16-34.** Could learning about other religions help you to more effectively share Christ with people you meet of other faiths?*

Why does Christ command us to share the gospel with all people?

Please send your comments, suggestions and any edits you recommend to BrimWoodpress.com. Thank you