Book Reviews
Bible Lessons
By Joseph Wilson

THE YEAR OF LIVING BIBLICALLY: ONE MAN'S HUMBLE QUEST TO FOLLOW THE BIBLE AS LITERALLY AS POSSIBLE by A.J. Jacobs (Simon & Schuster), 400 pages, $28.99 cloth.
Rating: **NNN**

A.J. Jacobs is something of an obsessive-compulsive. In The Year Of Living Biblically, the agnostic author and Esquire editor attempts to unearth every obscure rule in the Bible and live by the literal word for a full year.

He chronicles his experiment in minute detail, describing how it affects his life and the people around him. He stops shaving, wears clothes without mixed fibres and even gets a "slave" (an unpaid intern).

His wife comes across as the most patient woman in the world.

Jacobs carries a little stool around with him so he has somewhere to sit that has not been "contaminated" by a menstruating woman. He binds the Ten Commandments to his forehead every morning with string and, naturally, prays like mad.

He comes up with creative ways of fulfilling the letter of the law without compromising his morals. The Bible says not to "spare the rod," so he whacks his toddler son on the ass with a Nerf sword. His son thinks it's great fun.

One hilarious sequence recounts how he drops pebbles on people's feet in Central Park so he can say he threw stones at sinners.

His motivation is not to mock the ultra-religious right. He's moved by a genuine desire to understand the more bizarre rituals in the Bible, to empathize with the fanatics while digging into Biblical history.

Thus, the real meat of the book lies in its reflections on the importance of tradition. Jacobs develops a soft spot for saying grace and, bizarrely, for wearing all white.

Some will think he isn't critical enough of the Bible's misogyny and racism. The only thing that seriously raises his ire is a visit to the Creation Museum in Kentucky, where he's asked to discount everything he ever learned about evolution and history.

I'm looking forward to Jacobs's next wacky project, if only to see how his family will react.