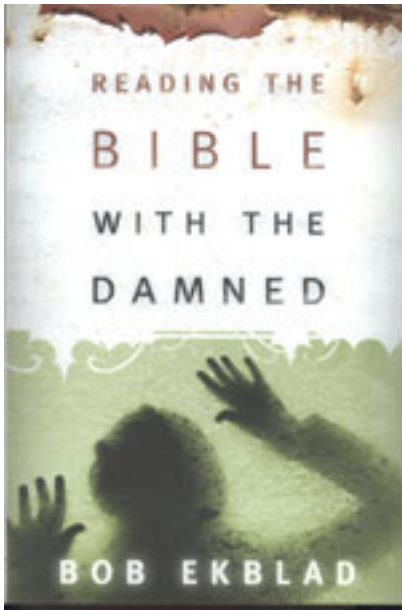


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Ekblad, Bob

Reading the Bible with the Damned

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. xvii + 203. Paper. \$17.95. ISBN 0664229174.

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Tierra Nueva, whose executive director is the author of this book, is “an ecumenical ministry dedicated to proclaiming the good news of God’s reign ... in solidarity with the oppressed for our mutual liberation, healing, empowerment, transformation, and total salvation” (advertisement on the last page of this book). In essence, this is the framework into which Ekblad sets his insights and new findings in the Bible. Above all, Margaret Mead’s words, “Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world; indeed, its the only thing that ever has” (previously cited on the Tierra Nueva website: <http://www.tierra-nueva.org>), are programmatic for Ekblad, even if they are not taken exactly as originally intended. Ekblad writes from a perspective that is new to most of his readers in order to initiate and motivate a rethinking of well-accepted and stable traditional readings of the Bible. Of course, such a fresh reading, a sort of rereading, should change something, whether within the readers themselves, with regard to their attitude toward others and the world, or even within whole societies and, thus, the whole world.

Bob Ekblad is not only executive director of Tierra Nueva & The People’s Seminary in Burlington, Washington, but also a minister in the Presbyterian church who reads the Bible with inmates in the Skagit County Jail and other “unlikely reading partners” who may be “classified as outsiders” (xiii; see also 197 n. 1: “among others, a Cuban Jew,

Guatemalan university students, Honduras campesinos, Chicano gang members, drug dealers, incarcerated heroin and crack and meth addicts, and undocumented farmworkers”). The influence of these various and varied perspectives and the experiences he has had explains to some degree the topic of his book. Moreover, Ekblad’s aim is “to present approaches to Scriptures reading and spirituality that I have found helpful in my work with outsiders and alienated insiders” (xiv). Therefore, Ekblad focuses on biblical texts that recount certain experiences of previously marginalized characters being freed by God’s activity; at the same time, he attempts to address modern-day readers who—as longtime church members—know only the mainstream explanation and interpretation of biblical stories as well as those outside or at the margin of the traditional church(es) who find it difficult to read the Bible anyway.

In order to bring all this together, Ekblad leaves conventional venues and reads the Bible with fresh eyes and from different perspectives. Ekblad’s success in doing so results in a book that is a good read: motivating, enlightening, and encouraging at the same time. For the readers addressed—basically anyone interested in the Bible and searching for new access to its texts and characters, whether minister or layperson, nonacademic or professional, regardless of one’s educational background—*Reading the Bible with the Damned* provides the opportunity to update one’s own knowledge of and perspective on biblical texts, sheds new light on otherwise often neglected aspects of the Bible, and may help one “to read the Bible yet again, as if for the first time,” as Walter Brueggemann said in a review of this work.

Of course, as a reader I approached the book with specific expectations, especially in light of its title. I expected, for example, attention to be paid to biblical characters who are depicted as the real outcasts, those who are damned and heretics, such as those in 2 Peter or Simon Magus (roughly mentioned in Acts). However, Ekblad focuses on the outsiders of today’s societies and the biblical stories appropriate for considering their plight. This is a good strategy that makes this book quite effective. Of course, Ekblad does not need to deal with complex historical matters in footnotes and can refrain from presenting various academic theses and their rebuttals. His main focus is on reading the Bible anew with eyes wide open. Readers who expect academic and scholarly discussions should neither be dissatisfied with the book nor blame Ekblad for not addressing certain theories and the state of the art of current research. They should rather divest themselves of their expectations and ask themselves how they may benefit from a shift of perspective and a *relecture* of biblical texts.

After his acknowledgements (ix–xi), Ekblad tells why he wrote the book and what he wants to achieve with it (xiii–xviii), as delineated earlier in this review. Then follow nine chapters of different lengths dealing with certain biblical narratives. Chapter 1 (“Reading

Scripture for the Liberation of the Not-Yet-Believing” [1–11]), however, serves as a kind of introductory prospectus of how to identify “pitfalls that keep religious insiders of a broad range of reading communities from experiencing the burning heart that mobilizes people toward the excluded other” (2). The aim is to come to a “liberating reading of the Bible.” Near the end of this chapter, Ekblad, in a precise and appealing way, tells his readers what they should do (e.g., “directly challenge common assumptions”; “challenge people’s view of who God is”; “welcome explanatory and creative interpretations”). With this in mind, readers are ready to take part in a journey through the Bible and parts of our modern world, stopping here and there in order to have a closer, then new look at the biblical characters and plots.

Most of the titles and subtitles of the chapters are self-explanatory and indicate the direction of the book: “New Beginnings Require New Readings: Reading Genesis in and out of Jail” (ch. 2; 11–24), “Getting Back into the Garden” (ch. 3; 25–60; focusing on Cain and Abel), “God Empowers the Down and Out: Nonheroic Reading of the Patriarchal Narratives” (ch. 4; 61–92), “Encountering God in Exodus and at Today’s Margin” (ch. 5; 93–111), “God’s Empowering Call to the People: Reading Isaiah with Exiles” (ch. 6; 113–26), “Reading and Praying the Psalms” (ch. 7; 127–53), “Reading the Gospels with Tax Collectors and Sinners” (ch. 8; 155–78), and “Following Jesus, the Good Coyote: Reading Paul with Undocumented Immigrants” (ch. 9; 179–96). The title of this last chapter might startle readers at first glance, but “reading Jesus as a coyote who brings us into God’s reign against the law at no charge” is derived from “years of working with undocumented immigrants struggling with the constant reality of possible deportation” (179–80).

Each of these nine chapters is written in a chatty and narrative style so that the readers gain a real impression of how Ekblad’s reading of the Bible together with people on the fringes of society works. In chapter 3, for instance, he tells about meeting Consuela, a Salvadoran woman with three young children, and about her troubles with God, who, she assumes, is angry with her because of her ongoing failure (25). The questions Ekblad asks Consuela, the biblical texts he refers to here, and the method he applies to motivate talks about them in jail Bible study (here on Gen 2–3) are presented alongside dialogues between him and those with whom he talked. Additionally, the attentive reader will learn something from those dialogues and Ekblad’s honest reflections on social affairs linked with modern-day life and its difficulties. As someone from outside the United States, I now know how to apply the image of the U.S. Congress as a point of comparison to God’s laws and am informed about the DSHS (Department of Social and Health Services) and the social pressure on the “Mixteco- and Triqui-speaking Oaxacan Indians ... at the bottom of the immigrant pecking order in Skagit County” (39), to mention only a few instances of side information in this chapter. That should do to illustrate Ekblad’s

realistic, honest, and vivid presentation of how to look at well-known biblical stories anew by telling how social outsiders react to them and describing how they live, that is, the background against which *they* read the stories.

The few notes to each chapter (197–203) present further pieces of information, so it is not clear why they were isolated from their context and put at the end of the volume. They should have been integrated into the major text, and some could have even been omitted. Of course, a book such as this does not need a bibliography, and so it is neither a shortcoming nor a failure that none is included here. Obviously, given the way Ekblad demonstrates how a synchronic rereading of biblical texts for specific groups with special needs could work, readers should be aware that the aim of the book is a missionary one. However, there is nothing wrong with that unless this is hidden from the outset. To his credit, Ekblad leaves no doubt from the very beginning that he is interested in mission, but his major concern is to be there for people who need assistance, support, and pragmatic help. In the end, this is the most impressive feature of the book, that all of this shines through the vivid depiction of how people on the fringes of society rely on God and how an individual is there for them.