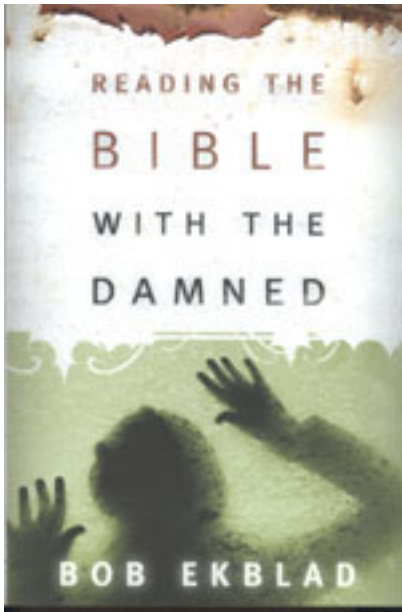


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Ekblad, Bob

Reading the Bible with the Damned

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To offer a summary statement from the outset: this book is certainly to be recommended, not only to workers of the church, but also to academic exegetes. It gains drive and power from a contextual reading of biblical texts. The context is that of the “damned”: excluded and marginalized people—concretely, prison inmates in the United States and campesinos in Honduras. These two groups of addressees, which differ greatly from one another, are bound together in the person and biography of the author. Ekblad, a Th.D. and pastor of a Presbyterian church who spent some years in Honduras, now lives in the state of Washington as director of an ecumenical institution called Tierra Nueva. If one follows a reference in the imprint of the book and visits the website of this institution and its seminar (www.peoplesseminary.org), a mission statement is discovered there, beginning with the words: “God is most fully revealed in Jesus’ descent from a position of power and privilege to one of service and solidarity with the poor and excluded of his day. God meets us in our encounters with the vulnerable and the weak: inmates, immigrants, and other outsiders.” Important guidelines of the present book are drawn out in this statement.

In the preface Ekblad states that the “mainstream church” possesses “an overidentification with the status quo,” with result is that “outsiders find it difficult to hear good, new, surprising, liberating news” as contained in the Bible. For people from the margins,

access to the gospel is barred by an understanding of the Bible widely marked by “literalism, moralism, and heroism” (xvi–xvii).

In his introductory chapter, “Reading Scripture for the Liberation of the Not-Yet-Believing,” Ekblad outlines the principles of his biblical interpretation. From liberation theologians such as Carlos Meesters, Ernesto Cardenal, Paulo Freire, and Gerald West, he learned that placing biblical texts in direct relationship to the life situations of the marginalized is essential. The theologian and exegete takes on the role of a facilitator or midwife. Ekblad suggests beginning Bible studies “with a question that evokes the contemporary context and burning issue(s) of the people with which you read” (6). Furthermore, it is crucial to dismantle the “theological assumptions” that people to whom the Bible is foreign often have: “Most people open the Bible expecting to hear detailed instructions about what they are supposed to do to be saved, the facilitator needs to deliberately and consistently help people see that the Bible tells us of a God who saves us by grace” (9). This is a good Reformational approach, and it apparently has a liberating effect on the addressees.

Thereafter the book offers examples of Bible study with the “damned,” mostly with inmates. It is in keeping with the style of a report, as if certain dialogues or group conversations have been recorded. In between, portraits of individual “damned” are interpolated, which leave an extremely vivid and true-to-life impression. The reader learns something about the afflictions and hopes of these people and is a witness to their experiences and insights. It is astounding to see what occurs when someone takes them seriously, dares to pray and read the Bible with them, encourages them to speak candidly, listens to them without prejudice, takes steps against their feelings of inferiority, and helps them find their identity and gain new confidence.

The first Bible study deals with Gen 1. Ekblad leads a group of inmates to correlate the *tohuwabohu* before the creation with their own situation. “It is easy for people on the streets or in the jail to talk about chaos, darkness, and the depths” (13). However, God is present and creates light. The facilitator asks the question: “So do you think this can happen now? How might God be present and speak and bring light now in our darkness?” A surprising answer arises: despite solitary confinement, one prisoner managed to read Ps 23 to another through the plumbing pipes, which were not sound-proof. Reading Gen 1 leads to the realization that God is neither invisible nor an old, strong, white man. One inmate says: “God is like one of us” (22).

Ekblad confesses that his perception of humanity has increasingly changed into a positive one, as he is drawn to an “Eastern” anthropology (24). His perception of God is purely positive, in and of itself. This is crucial, for “negative images of God are what most

separate people from God” (34). Ekblad starts a Bible study of Gen 2–3 with the question whether God is a judge who punishes transgressions against his commandments. “Of course,” is the inmates’ response, who overhear that the command to eat from every tree of the garden is proclaimed before eating from the *one* tree is forbidden. The serpent is the first to darken the image of God. It deceitfully asks: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” “Discovering a Good God” is Ekblad’s main goal in studying the Bible (34). After the transgression of primal humanity, God did not come into the garden with the intent of punishing them but to help them out of the situation into which they had maneuvered themselves. In Gen 4 as well God does not act randomly (in accepting Abel’s sacrifice) or harshly (in avenging Cain’s act of murder) by any means; rather, he takes sides with the weak (Abel) and protects the strong who has made himself guilty (Cain). This is an insightful view of the text, but Ekblad would have done well to avoid seeking reasons for God’s rejection of Cain’s sacrifice (44–50). Some riddles simply cannot be solved!

Following a summary of his perception of God and humankind in the image of the physician who heals the wounded (54–60), Ekblad turns to the patriarchal narratives. Naturally, Abraham’s family is a typical migrant family and not at all “heroic religious figures” (65). Abraham is called without any conditions. A Bible study with a group of Mexican immigrants on Gen 16 begins with the question: “Do you ever feel like other people or forces are acting upon you and have power over you?” This leads to an identification with Hagar—and to criticism of Abraham and Sarah, who treat their female slave badly. By coming to her aid, God is “separate from the system and the dominant theology” (75)! “I seek to deliberately subvert the oppressive dominant theology.... In contrast to ‘scientific exegesis’, which claims to be objective and unbiased theologically, the socially engaged biblical scholar must both encourage people to directly question and challenge assumptions about God that most oppress them and invite them to consider a liberating alternative way of reading” (73–74).

When Jacob snatches the birthright away from Esau with the active support of Rebecca in Gen 25–27, this is an act of resistance against Isaac’s and Esau’s cartel of power. Ekblad dares to make an actualization: “Clearly the closest example there in our jail Bible study of a modern equivalent of an Esau (one who has favor, power, and the like) would be me: a white male, American” (79). God stands by the disadvantaged one: in appearing to him (in Gen 28), God does not rebuke him—nor does God praise him—but rather promises to accompany him during the difficult course of his life. This is “a clear announcement of God’s love for and willingness to bless the underdog” (85).

The Moses narratives (Exod 1–3) serve primarily to clarify the relationship between the damned, the facilitator, and society. It is obvious that Pharaoh and the Egyptian

taskmasters represent the ruling circles of society, while the Hebrews represent marginalized people. However, who corresponds to the pastor and trained Bible scholar? Is it Moses, the Hebrew who enjoyed the privileges of the system and wanted to come to the aid of his brother with violence? Or is he one of the “religious taskmasters of the dominant theology?” (99). In either case, God still has much work to do with Moses.

Although Proto-Isaiah was of noble descent and a religious insider, he took up a position against the depraved upper class—therefore taking sides with the oppressed. Deutero-Isaiah took sides with the members of the upper class who were in the exile themselves oppressed. Without hesitation, Ekblad interprets the servant of the Lord collectively, with respect to Israel in bondage and to today’s prisoners: “You are not the servant of the Babylonians! You are the servant of the living God! You are not the servant of the courts, cocaine, Budweiser, the American dream, an employer: ‘Here is my servant!’ ‘Here is my inmate,’ ‘Here is my illegal alien,’ says the Lord” (124).

Ekblad recommends the Psalms to his audience as a personal book of prayer. Inmates do not pray easily, and when they do, then “very cautiously, crafting the words to say what they believe will be most pleasing to an easily insulted and volatile God” (127). The psalmists act quite differently. They “articulate a wide range of uncensored sentiments and thinking before God” (128). “Marginalized people are surprised when the psalms use language and images that evoke their life situations and oppression” (129). There is even room for a desire for revenge; however, Ekblad instructs his addressees to sublimate these feelings in a Christian manner (134–37). Finally, Ps 8 serves as a foundation for his discussion of ecological questions about the Honduran jungle. Not only marginalized people are fighting to survive there; North American mining companies are also fighting for their profits.

To put it concisely, this is an innovative and animating book. It is marked by a certain one-sidedness, but occasionally a voice crying in the wilderness must be one-sided, indeed.