

Reading the Bible with the Damned

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The theme of *Reading the Bible with the Damned* is the life work of Dr. Bob Ekblad. This provocative title refers to his method of reading the scriptures with several marginalized communities, including undocumented migrants in the USA, people in prison, those in exile, subsistence farmers in rural Honduras, as well as Guatemalan university students (197). His perspective is consistent throughout: the underclass (197) is disenfranchised and believes themselves undeserving of God's love. Various factors play into this deep-seated sense of unworthiness, including racism, poverty, run-ins with the justice system and immigration, as well as moralistic church experiences. For them the world holds mostly *bad* news, with little hope for a better future and a pervasive sense of being outcasts before God. They expect pastors and the Bible to function in their lives like immigration judges and border patrol agents – heavy on judgment for these undeserving lawbreakers. Ekblad demonstrates through careful exegesis of biblical texts and reconstructed scripts of Bible studies he has led among the “damned”, that the Bible is in fact *good* news for them. In fact, healing their image of God as a loving parent is the primary objective of reading the Bible with the marginalized.

In the preface the author describes the wide gulf between the affluent middle-class church and the socially excluded. This gulf prevents most church members from connecting with the disenfranchised, who reflexively feel unable to relate to the “gospel” of the middle class. “Mainstream people who are generally morally correct, law-abiding citizens are often afraid of people who habitually break the law and the established moral rules. These people are seen as ‘the problem,’ because they are ‘out of compliance’” (xv). Rather than simply exporting the gospel of middle-class suburbia, a different approach is required – one that both understands the worldview of the underclass well and connects the Bible with their distinct perspective. While Ekblad doesn't use this term, I describe his hermeneutic as “upside down.” This involves

reading the Bible through the eyes of the poor and marginalized – not moralistically, nor heroically, but through the lens of the “damned.” In this perspective, the focus is on themes like the Magnificat (Luke 1:52): “He has brought down rulers from their thrones / but has lifted up the humble.” (See also 1 Samuel 2:8).

One example to illustrate. In the final chapter, he presents Jesus to undocumented migrants as “the good coyote.” The term coyote is Spanish slang for smugglers who hire themselves out to help people illegally enter the USA. They charge exorbitant sums and can be violent and unreliable. Based on this cultural reality, he portrays Jesus as the good coyote who guides people safely and assuredly into the kingdom of God. The best news of all: People do not pay this coyote, as he himself pays their overwhelming debt for them! This beautiful cultural connection gives people incredible hope (179-196).

In terms of my personal engagement with this book, I have several commendations and a couple of questions. First, the positives. He observes that the downtrodden often have a fatalistic worldview, believing that everything that happens to them is “God-ordained” (139). This includes natural disasters, death, the law, accidents, and racism, among others. But not everything is the work of God. Simply knowing that determinism is at the core of many marginalized worldviews is essential, because this must be undone in order to heal their view of life and God and empower them in their own agency.

Another strength of this book is it helped me see how pervasive my privilege as a Canadian is. The chaotic and destructive role of nature in the lives of rural farmers in Central America in chapter seven was both enlightening and convicting. There, images of God and nature coalesce, so that the crushing and death-dealing tropical environment is equated with God himself. Nature is deified and a biblical view of God as a loving Father is constricted by the

extreme harshness of the climate. Ekblad contrasts this with the “Gore-Tex theology” of North America, where very favourable climates enable “creation spirituality done from behind the shelter of privilege” (141-147). The poor in these rural tropical climates have so many barriers to overcome in nature just to survive, whereas my obstacles in Canada (even in an inner-city context) are far less. Truly I don’t understand the depth and breadth of my privilege.

The third positive I took from this was the great attention to detail that he brought to his reading of the scriptures. I consider myself a solid Bible student. But his readings of various texts showed me that there is much more detail in several stories than I had not noticed before. This both inspired and convicted me, to read the scriptures with much greater attention to detail!

I also have a few questions. One was his bifurcation between physical and spiritual enemies (137-141). I need to think through this dichotomy more before I can embrace it and teach it with intellectual integrity.

Another caution is the need to always portray God in a positive light rather than as a punitive judge. This is largely justified, given that the underclass have had many negative experiences with the justice system. Healing their deformed images of God is very important. But this does not mean that we should ignore the teaching that God is a righteous judge. Abraham’s famous intercession for Sodom is grounded in the appeal to God as the just judge: “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25, RSV). What is needed is a robust biblical theology of the character of God, and a strong understanding of the perception of God among the underclasses. Then the full nature of God can be taught in a strongly contextualized way. I think in fairness, Ekblad does well with all of this. And my concern here is a minor one.