

Lois Tverberg

**Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus**

Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018., pp. 288.

In January of 2018 Baker Books published another book by Lois Tverberg titled, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus: How a Jewish Perspective Can transform Your Understanding*. This is another book on Jewish background of Christianity by the author who in 2001, published her first book *Listening to the Language of the Bible* which was a devotional guide to Hebrew words and ideas, and in 2009, partnered with Ann Spangler published her second book *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* in which they challenged their readers to hear Jesus' teaching in light of Jewish thought. This new book is focused on bridging the cultural gap between Jesus' Middle Eastern Jewish world and ours in order to read the Bible as natives (p. 11). The book has three main parts and altogether eleven chapters. At the end, the author brings three appendixes which brings the division of the Hebrew Bible, thirty useful Hebrew words for Bible study, and Bible translations for word study.

Chapter one, "Opening the Bible with Jesus," serves as an introduction to the book in which the author explains the need for reading the Bible in its Middle Eastern setting, her previous work in that area, and explains the purpose for writing such a book. According to the author, embracing Jesus' Jewishness is a fairly recent development in Christian scholarship but something that is needed because "seeing him in his context sheds brilliant new light on his ministry and deepens our understanding of his words" (p. 11). Because the Bible is a Jewish book which eventually entered the Gentile world, we need to travel across time and culture to become familiar with the framework of Jesus' original setting to grasp many ideas that first-century listeners found in Scriptures. The problem is not so much temporal but also a cultural gap between modern Western readers and the biblical world.

Part one, "Repacking Our Mental Bags: Tools for Journey," contains chapters two, three, and four. Chapter two, "Learning to Be There," discusses the clash of cultures. The author warns us on two mistakes: we may assume that our perspective is universal and project it onto the biblical world or suppose that the culture of the biblical world is God's perfect plan for humanity. After comparing *our* world (people want to be thin and young; they question the existence of God; individualism is desirable; sunshine makes us happy; logic and reason shape our thinking) with *biblical* world (fat is blessing and wealth; age brings wisdom; the question is whose god is greatest; identity comes from the collective; rain brings

joy; parable and prophecy shaped their thinking), the author furthermore discuss modern Euro/American culture by using the acronym WEIRD – which stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic, briefly explaining each characteristic. In chapter three, “What Does ‘Christ’ Mean, Anyway?” the author discuss the concept of the word *christos* or *maschiach/Messiah*. In the Hebrew Bible, an “anointed” person could be kings, priests, and prophets, but that does not mean that the title “Christ” automatically assumes divinity. So when we talk about Jesus Christ, we should think about Jesus, God’s chosen King. Although the whole “king” idea might seem utterly foreign to the life of a humble Galilean rabbi, this idea is strongly present in the gospels. After presenting some biblical texts that reflect this idea, the author focuses on the puzzling question of the gospel. She assumed that the Gospel – “the good news” in the New Testament meant “that we have forgiveness of sins because of Jesus’ sacrifice for us on the cross” (p. 51), but *euangelion* also comes from terminology that was used in regard to kings and their dominions. Hence, the gospel, the *euangelion*, is simply “that God had appointed Jesus as his chosen King” (p. 52). But then she addresses another puzzle: “How does Jesus being the promised King of Israel have anything to do with us being saved from our sins?” (p. 52). Noticing that to our modern ears the idea that this world has a King might not resonate with us and may actually offend us, the author finds the solution for the connection between “king/kingdom” and “the cross” in another idea associated with ancient kings: “kings in ancient time were also expected to act as judges” (p. 54). King rulership is also executed through his judging of the wicked and salvation of the oppressed. Chapter four, “Painting in Hebrew,” deals with the problems of Bible translations. Since, according to the author, “each language is a palette with finite amount of colors” (p. 60), when we speak, in a sense, we paint. So if we want to get the truest sense of the original text, we can do that by reading more than one translation and compare them. Another set of tools that will greatly aid in encountering the Scriptures as Jesus’ first disciples did is to familiarize ourselves with some of the Bible’s Hebrew words. In the rest of the chapter, the author discusses some Hebrew words such as *halakh*: “to walk,” *ruach*: “breath,” “wind,” “spirit,” *yirah*: “fear,” *bayit*: “house,” etc. The chapter ends with discussion of the Hebrew words for “forgetting” *shakach* and *nashah* for “remembering.”

Part two, “How the Bible Thinks: Big Picture Ideas That You Need to Understand,” contains chapter five, six, seven, and eight. Chapter five, “Greek Brain, Hebrew Brain” compares the Greek and Hebrew way of thinking and communication. Western culture embraces an analytical approach to life which gave birth to modern science. The origin of this began back in ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C. According to the author, this Greek analytical approach created an enormous gulf between the biblical world and ours. While Jesus’ style of com-

munication through parables and concrete images reflects the ancient traditional method of communicating truth, Paul communicated to his Greek-speaking audience in a more Western style, using propositions and logic. The background for this difference originates from Greek philosophers who converted their experience into simple, abstract ideas that they could manipulate mentally. Abstract worlds gave birth to something we today call “concepts.” The challenge is this: “Once you shift into a world of abstract ideas, you can explore it in infinitely more detailed ways than when you think in terms of concrete, particular, real-world things” (p. 86). Hence, “truth can be found by studying, splitting, categorizing, and simplifying reality into concepts that could be mentally manipulated” (p. 86). The end result was that arguments could be built based on boiling down ideas into simple abstractions which could be linked together according to the rules of formal logic. Western world has made this style of reasoning central for how we think and communicate. Hebrew mindset uses parables, metaphors, and proverbs as forms of communication. The emphasis is on stories not concepts. While the Greeks could compress complex ideas into single words which can be then detached from reality, dissected, and analyzed, the Hebrew mindset produces meaning from concrete imagery. Observation about nature and daily life can be used to shed light on spiritual realities or mysterious ways of God. Furthermore, examples based on human experience can be used to explain God’s ways. That is why much of Jesus’ theology was done through storytelling. This discussion the author applies to the popular idea that Christian religion is a list of doctrinal bullet points to be affirmed, and belief is a mental assent to abstract statements of truth. Chapter six, “Why Jesus Needs Those Boring ‘Begats,’” focuses on the significance and importance of family and interfamily relationships. The family line was essential for one’s identity and we can even say that the Bible is a long and winding epic of a family that God has chosen. For that matter “grasping the ideas that ancient people had about the family and how these themes play out can help us understand our Bibles from beginning to end” (p. 114). Since families were framework of society and culture was structured in terms of extended family relationships, being a “son” or *ben* in Hebrew, often referred to later descendants. In the ancient Near East, it was expected that a son would take on father’s profession and serve the same god that he did, but this inherent identity assumed that children would resemble their father in personality too. So being a “son of...” meant that that person is *like* his ancestor. Given the importance of a family, its history would be kept in memories and stories and that its identity shaped the individuals. Individuals were not important – what was important was a success of a family, because families, unlike individuals, were enduring. Marriages were arranged, and the key to success in life was not to find a lover but to raise a bountiful family. Describing how industrial age has affected and changed the position of a family

and individuals, in the rest of the chapter the author discusses singleness of Jesus and the concept of “son of Abraham,” since person’s salvation was linked with being a part of the covenantal family. Chapter seven, “Reading the Bible as ‘We,’” somewhat continues the subject from previous chapter addressing the issue of individualism vs. collectivism. Namely, the author warns us that “the more I study the Bible, however, the more I’m realizing the many ways that an individualistic approach misunderstands the text” (p. 132). After she gives two examples of such reading (1 Cor. 3:16; Matt. 5:14), the author invites us to put away our “selfie stick” and start thinking as “we.” The author also explains the difference between our individualistic culture and collective culture in biblical times by discussing the importance of one’s “name” within the family/community, the importance of “honor-shame” in collectivist cultures, and the significance in giving someone “a new name.” In the rest of the chapter, the author also addresses few other topics: our intention to overlook the communal implications of many Old Testament laws; our tendency to read our Bibles as a collection of stories of individuals and their personal encounters with God instead as the story of the family of Abraham and the kingdom of Christ; the importance of Israel as God’s covenant family and inclusion of Gentiles into it; Bible’s usage of the singular pronouns when speaking about group; the illogical logic of granting mercy to the guilty party for the sake of other innocent person and related idea of *zechut avot* or “merit of the fathers;” and the fact that the term “kingdom” describes community and “gospel” is not individual message of salvation but Jesus was speaking in terms of redeeming a *whole people*: Christ as “God’s appointed King rules over a kingdom, a body of people, and to “accept Christ” is to “enter his kingdom” (p. 153). The final chapter in this part, “Like Grasshoppers in Our Own Eyes,” talks about the smallness of men who are part of a larger system at the mercy of forces much greater than themselves. In other words, today’s humanity is blind to anything bigger than itself, and what we need is a sense of humility. This sense of our “bigness” is a result of our Western perspective which is shaped with Greek thinking where learning is done to comprehend, while Hebrew thought emphasizes learning in order to revere. While “comprehension” gives us a “sense of greatness,” and “revering” focuses us on how “to live” according to God’s will. With those spectacles, the author invites us to observe the smallness of Israel as a nation, the polytheistic nature of a pagan world with many finite and limited gods, to read the story of Exodus through ancient eyes, and to regain the sense of awe for God, realizing that the idea that humans are created in the image of God was a radical idea unparalleled in that time.

Part Three, “Reading about the Messiah: Seeing Him Through Hebrew Eyes,” contains chapters nine, ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen. Chapter nine, “Memory is Critical,” discusses the role of memorization of the Scripture. Namely, in Jesus’

time as well as today in Orthodox Jewish education, memorization of the Hebrew Bible as well as other Jewish writings (such as *Mishnah* and *Talmud*) was a normal thing. Knowledge was not stored on bookshelves but rather in brains. After brief introduction to Jewish education around the first century, the author focuses on Jesus' practice of "hinting at the Scriptures" showing it on concrete examples. The conclusion of this chapter is that "much of the reason we've found Jesus' words so hard to grasp is because we are so unfamiliar with the Scriptures he loved" (p. 190). Chapter ten, "Moses and the Prophets Have Spoken," discusses the role of synagogue as part of Jesus' ministry. The author introduces us with practice of reading from the Torah (*parashah*) and Prophets (*haftarah*), so today across the world every synagogue reads the same text each week. The tradition of reading the Torah annually according to standardized lectionary was developed back in 400 – 500 AD. Discussing some other findings about this practice and changes that occurred in time (such as change of focus in readings from the Prophets), the author inform us that probably in Jesus time reading from the Torah was predetermined, but reading from the Prophets (list of books belonging to the Prophets are not the same in Christian and Hebrew canon) was up to the speaker to choose, connect it with Torah passage, and deliver a good sermon. In the rest of the chapter, the author provides us with some examples of such practice both from the Bible and Jewish tradition. Chapter eleven, "Reading in the Third Dimension," discusses the practice and habit of listening for echoes in the text. As people would listen the Scriptures read repeatedly year after year (see previous chapter), their memory of the text would grow, and they would "start to notice themes rippling through the text and hear how earlier events foreshadow later events" (p. 209). After presenting several examples of such reading, the author focuses on different methodologies of reading the Old Testament. Defining such reading of the Bible where earlier texts shed light on later events, and how later events repeat and echo earlier ones as "reading the Bible in three dimensions" (p. 216), the author briefly discusses "figural reading" (*prospectively*) and typological reading of the Bible (*retrospectively*). Chapter twelve, "Jesus' Bold Messianic Claims," criticizes an outlook of the liberal theology that Jesus never claimed that he is "Christ," but that was an invention of the Early Church. For that matter, the author analyses very subtle, yet very Jewish ways in which Jesus declared his messiahship. The author exposes us to various biblical texts and ideas that speak about Jesus' messiahship, such as: prophecy from Numbers 24:17, Jesus' declaration of himself as king of Jubilee from Luke 4 (Isa. 61), calling God "my" Father, declaration of himself as divine Messiah based on Daniel 7, description of him as divine shepherd, etc. The last chapter, chapter thirteen, "When the Words Catch Fire," focuses on what we miss in Isaiah 53, but also serves as a conclusion of the book. The author expresses her hope that this book gave to readers some new tools

that will equip readers to read the Bible “from the perspective of a first-century disciple but then speak into our world” (p. 239). In this last chapter the author wants to provide an answer to the question, “how can a person both suffer and die *and* be a glorious king?” (p. 239). The answer lies in a key passage – Isaiah 53 which now with all the tools we have gained throughout this book, we can unfold as never before. In a study of this text the author points us toward the fact that the messianic Shepherd in this passage is also “lamb who was slain,” and based on Isa. 53:12 this person has been awarded with the people as his spoils because of his suffering on their behalf. The similar idea we encounter in Psalm 2:7-8 where God has given to his anointed nations as a gift. Hence, people are not just his “subjects” but also “possession.” Accordingly, Isaiah 53 does not speak only about Servant’s suffering and atonement of sin. Yes, that is included, but the text also speaks that God’s Servant because of his suffering has been granted a kingdom, just like the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and the royal Son of Psalm 2. Hence, Jesus’ death did not just pay for our sins, but it also purchased our very lives. Such outlook helps solve the problem as to how a “historical version of *euanggelion* that ‘Jesus is God’s Anointed King’ fit together with the gospel I read in evangelism tracts – that if I accept Jesus as my personal Savior, he will pay for all my sins” (p. 247). The chapter ends with two more ideas: first, due to our Western individualism we focus on Christ dying for “my sins” while missing the fact that through his sacrificial death, Jesus purchased an entire kingdom, and second, based on Luke 24:46-47, this newly crowned messianic King has proclaimed a Jubilee.

The book *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus* by Lois Tverberg is the book which is a part of a growing positive tendency in Christianity to discover the Jewish roots of Christian faith. Although in this area there are still some open questions and debate (Jesus’ attitude toward the Law; whether Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah should keep Sinai covenant or not, and to what extent; do Gentiles have to keep Sinai covenant or not, etc.), this book guides smoothly readers into Jewish world of Jesus and for that matter Early Christianity, exposing them to the culture of Judaism. At the same time, readers are forced to identify characteristics of our modern Western worldview which sometime prevents them from seeing, hearing, and understanding the depth of biblical texts.

This book truly provides some good tools for more quality reading of the Bible which should in turn affect the way we live and teach. At the end of each chapter, the author brings “Tools and Reflections” in which the reader is challenged to read particular texts and think about particular issues and exposed to some “thoughts to go deeper.” The parts and chapters are written logically because the book starts with addressing current Western worldview, which leads us into a biblical mindset, and ends with sharing some light on selected biblical topics.

The book is written for the average Christian who wants to discover more

about the Jewish roots of Christian faith. Also, it can be used as a secondary literature in theological schools, because parts of the book that deal with Jewish hermeneutics and mindset can be valuable for students of theology. This book is also recommendable for church ministers because it does not only give them material for study, teaching, and preaching, but also tools for addressing some contemporary negative tendencies of our time (for example, individualism) and the correction of them. This book is more than welcomed, and I hope that in the future this and similar books would be available in the Croatian language for all those who do not read English.

Ervin Budiselić

Seth D. Postell, Eitan Bar, and Erez Soref

**Reading Moses Seeing Jesus: How the Torah Fulfils its Goal in Yeshua** (Expanded Second Edition)

ONE FOR ISRAEL Ministry, Southlake, TX, USA, 2017, 128.

Encountering books written by Jewish believers in Christ can be remarkably interesting and enlightening. Without any epistemological infatuation, it is beneficial to hear them out and see if we can gain from their perspective. *Reading Moses, Seeing Jesus* is one of those books. It was written by three Israeli authors, who work for ONE FOR ISRAEL Ministry. They believe that they are able to offer a unique perspective on the understanding the Torah (Five books of Moses) and the Law found in the Torah. They disagree with the prevalent notion that the Torah is a law book (Loc. 249), as they believe that it is primarily “an historical narrative, whose purpose is to lead Israel *through* the broken Law and beyond, namely, *to* the Messiah” (Loc. 253).

*Reading Moses, Seeing Jesus* has two parts, and therefore two interconnected purposes. In the first part of the book, authors show that the purpose of Law is for it to be fulfilled in Christ while the second part of the book shows why believers in Christ, from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, do not need to obey the Old Testament Law, even if they will still read it and apply it as Scripture.

The backbone principle of the book is a literary feature “*ma’asei avot, siman l’banim*,” meaning “the deeds of the fathers are a sign to the sons” (Loc. 342). This principle means that we can find stories in the Torah written not only to tell us about the patriarchs, but also about their descendants in the future. Biblical scholars will be more familiar with this feature as “narrative typology or literary analogy” (Loc. 346). We should not confuse it with allegorical interpretation, because these come from authorial intent and can be identified by “tangible, identifiable features in the text itself,” namely “shared words and phrases (lexical