

## STUDY GUIDE

### READING THE BIBLE AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME: TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY BUT NOT LITERALLY

I want to note that this book was dedicated to the community at Ring Lake Ranch, Dubois Wyoming and Tom Haller (year 2000). I led a week-long session at Ring Lake in July of 2018. Tom Haller who suffered a serious injury in 2000 recovered, may I say, miraculously. (see Preface xii for Marc's tribute) Tom attended the session this summer. In gratitude for the transformative ongoing work at Ring Lake and in thanksgiving for Tom Haller. Our very own Lazarus.

The following is not an exhaustive guide to Reading the Bible Again for the First Time. There is a lot of education and information in this book. But these suggested highlights are a start. I count on you dear readers to expand and explore. This book will help us return again and again to reading the Bible. And taking it seriously.

#### PART ONE:

#### Chapter One: Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again.

"As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. The older set, grounded and polished by modernity, no longer works for millions of people. These lenses need to be replaced. The older way of seeing and reading the Bible... has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant for vast numbers of people... Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today... the conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible." (from the preface) Note that "modernity" are the lenses we see through today.

"As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible."

Take time to understand the "older way of seeing Christianity" and "seeing again in our cultural context." Note "natural literalism" and "conscious literalism." Softer and harder forms of literalism.

Take time to explore the earlier way of seeing and if indeed this names a taken for granted understanding of how we see the Bible and Christianity. Explore your experience of reading the Bible and its relationship to assumed tenants of "belief." Then discuss the importance of "seeing again." Explore the argument that it is imperative (my word) to see the Bible again in the context of current historical and biblical scholarship and within the posits of our postmodern world. What do people think about the importance of reading the Bible today with full awareness that scientific and intellectual honesty require us to read and "hear" these stories a new way?

## Chapter 2: Reading Lenses, The Bible and God.

"The Bible is a human response to God." In other words, the Bible is a human product. To quote from Jeremy Wright, the Bible is "our stories about God, not God's stories about us." What do you make of this? How does this affect how people read the Bible and understand its origins? What kind of mirror is the Bible? (We see ourselves.)

What do you make of the claim that the Bible was not written for us but is rather the reflections of two ancient communities?

Explore Marc's categories when referring to the Bible: sacred status, cultural linguist world, finger pointing to the moon, sacrament.

How does this change your relationship to the Scriptures and even your relationship to God?

## Chapter 3: Reading Lenses, History and Metaphor.

"...the Bible is a human product – the product of two ancient communities. This is the lens through which I see scripture. The Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) is the product of ancient Israel. The New Testament is the product of the early Christian movement. What the Bible says is the words of those communities, not God's words. To see the Bible as a human product does not in any way deny the reality of God...a central premise is that God is real and can be experienced."

Review Marc's case for seeing the Bible as a human product. This understanding is foundational for seeing Christianity through a 21<sup>st</sup> century lens.

Marc makes a move from seeing the Bible to reading the Bible. He uses an Historical-Metaphorical Approach. The historical approach: what is it? why does it matter, what are its limitations. The metaphorical approach: what is it? why does it matter, what are its limitations.

Marcus makes the claim that "the historical and metaphorical approach to reading the Bible need each other." To appreciate Marc's premise, we need to understand this. Discuss.

Marcus goes on to say that "the Bible is a combination of historical memories and metaphorical narratives." Some narratives are "metaphorized history" and some are "purely metaphorical narratives." What does he mean by that?

Once we get this distinction we can begin to see again in fresh ways... Does this make sense to you? Examples from your own experience would be helpful to explore.

The Bible as stories about the divine-human relationship then and now. The Bible stories reflect the human condition and its challenges. Thematically these challenges haven't changed all that much over the centuries. (Marcus also explores narrative themes like exodus, exile, bondage, liberation, homecoming that reflect experiences and existential longing that we humans have struggled with for millennia. See his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.) Share how some of the bible stories have addressed your particular concerns and experiences.

"Post Critical Naivete: an integration into a larger whole." Explore Marc's important distinctions between pre and post critical naivete (post critical naivete: I don't know if the story happened this way or not, but I know that the story is true....)

Why is being able to read the Bible using an historical and metaphorical approach important?

## PART TWO

### Chapter 4: Reading the Creation Stories Again

Use the word "Hebrew Bible" instead of "Old Testament." Review why this is important. It is not just "politically correct." It is not only respectful but historically more accurate.

"Contemporary biblical scholarship does not read the creation stories as historically factual accounts of the world's beginnings. Instead it sees them as ancient Israel's stories of the world's beginnings and interprets them as profoundly true mythological stories." This is an essential understanding. Consider that the ancient creation stories (and other ancient stories as well) were imagined within an ancient worldview, in brief a three-story universe. Our worldview (our understanding of how reality and cosmos is structured) is not the ancient worldview and is rapidly changing. With this in mind, how does that inform the fact that the creation stories are not historically factual but rather attempts to describe the world within their own knowledge and narratives.

Marcus asks two important questions of the creation narratives: "why did ancient Israel tell these stories? And why did they tell them this way?" Discuss why this is an essential question. And consider that we continue tell "our story" with these two questions in mind whether consciously or not. Discuss.

Marcus says "a historical-metaphorical approach provides illuminating answers to both" questions.

Discuss

Marcus explores creation stories as Myths. "Myth" is commonly a dismissive term, not to be taken seriously, considered a mistaken belief, a falsehood. Marc clarifies this misconception. "Myths are not explanations. Myths are not primitive science. Myths are not mistaken beliefs. Rather, myths are metaphorical narratives about the relation between this world and the sacred.... Myths use non-literal language; in this sense, they do not narrate facts. But myths are necessary if we are to speak at all about the world's origin and destiny in God. We have no other language for such matters."

Discuss

Marc helps us explore how the creation stories address the human predicament and solutions. Explore.

## Chapter 5: Reading the Pentateuch Again

The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the foundation of ancient Israel's life. A combination of sacred narrative and sacred law.

Marc comments that his "primary concern in this chapter is with Israel's story of origins in its present form, and not with a reconstruction of the history that lies behind it. This chapter takes us through Israel's primary and paradigmatic stories. Review as you wish.

Marc highlights general themes of this narrative:

- We began as nomads, wanderers upon the earth without a home.
- We fell into slavery to the lord of Egypt.
- God heard our groaning and liberated us from bondage.
- And God gave us a bountiful land in which to live.

Consider this as a metaphorical narrative describing the human journey. And even describing the nature and character of "God." Can you relate to the themes? We are wanderers, searchers....we become influenced by "pharaohs" internal and external, we are "heard" maybe our own true self knows when it is in bondage, "bountiful land" is not about the hereafter. These are prompts. Explore these themes from your own experience.

## Chapter 6: Reading the Prophets Again

The Prophets is the second major portion of the Hebrew Bible.

"The prophets were part of Israel's sacred tradition. They sought to show continuity between Jesus and the tradition out of which he came, and they came." Marcus makes an important clarification: "the correspondences are not the product of prediction and fulfillment, but of prophecy historicized. In other words, the New Testament authors used passages from the Hebrew Bible to generate historical narrative." (pg. 110) I would put it this way. The New Testament authors used prophetic stories retrospectively. To make a case for Jesus being the one they had been waiting for. Reflect on the importance of this.

Marcus spends time describing the passion for social justice as experienced in the book of Amos. Reading this book galvanized Marc. Changed his political and social awareness. Take time to explore the book of Amos with the help of Marcus's insights. How does it strike you?

The prophets focus was on "justice in this world and about the destiny and fate of societies within history. Even if God were not real, these were crucially important matters." Reflect on this statement. And your understanding of the focus of Christianity today.

Marcus affirms that the experience of the sacred were integral to the prophets' affirmation that "God subverts rather than legitimates the social order." What do you make of that? Do your experiences of the sacred align with this?

"Prophetic criticizing and energizing are most relevant to our time when we hear what the prophets were saying in *their* time, not when we divorce them from their time and imagine that they were predicting a distant future. Though their language is full of metaphor, as poetic language always is, we hear them most clearly when we hear them most historically." Discuss.

## Chapter 7: Israel's Wisdom Again

The Wisdom literature, The Writings, in the Hebrew Bible includes the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the book of Job.

"As we explore these books, we will not only taste the riches of Israel's wisdom tradition, but also become aware of an intense and probing dialogue - even a conflict - within it. Is life as simple as knowing the right things to do and doing them? Does everything work out if you live right? And if life is not so simple but much more mysterious, what does that say about the nature of God, the purpose of life, and how we are to live?"

Marcus explores how Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job deal with such questions. Review the Writings as you wish. But surely ask yourself the questions I quote from Marc in the above paragraph.

Marcus names firsthand and second-hand religion. Pg. 178. A truncated summary here: (p. 179)

"Israel's conventional wisdom, as seen in the cumulative effect of the book of Proverbs, is second hand religion: religion as an orderly set of teachings about how things are and how things go. The alternative voice of Israel's wisdom - the wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes - is grounded in the experience of God." [first hand encounter]

Explore your experience of "first hand religion" and "second hand religion." What you have been taught about God and what you are to believe and your own personal experience of God and what that makes you wonder about.

Marcus closes this chapter with this paragraph:

"The conflict within Israel's wisdom tradition is one of two major conflicts within the Hebrew Bible. The other we have already seen: the conflict between the imperial theology of Egypt and exodus theology, between the royal theology of Israel's monarchy and the message of Israel's prophets. [See previous chapters.] The New Testament continues the story of these conflicts. It does not resolve them, however; if anything, it intensifies them. It also names the central tension and conflicts that run through subsequent Christian history."

This paragraph can help you review previous chapters on the "Law and the Prophets." Identifying the themes as Marc did is important for understanding the ongoing narrative of the New Testament. And as Marc says, subsequent Christian history. Review and discuss. This is important foundation for reading the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

## PART THREE

## Chapter 8: Reading the Gospels Again

"Not only is The Hebrew Bible part of the Christian Bible, but it was the sacred scripture for Jesus, his followers, the early Christian movement, and the authors of the New Testament....their lives lived within the symbolic universe constitute by its words, images, and stories.....We understand early Christianity best when we see it as a way of being Jewish."

Marc provides historical context for the writings in the New Testament. Context is always important when reading the Bible.

"Just as the story of the exodus is ancient Israel's primal narrative, so the gospels are the early Christian movement's primal narratives...."

The gospels were written between 65 and 100 CE. The earliest is Mark. [Of note, later scholarship suggests Luke could be as late as 120, later than John. See Marc's Evolution of the Word.]

It is important to remember that even though the Gospels were written as if firsthand accounts they are not. They are "history remembered, or prophecy historicized" or metaphorical narratives. With this in mind, consider "why the story is told this way." Keep in mind there is the author's "voice," the voice of Jesus, the voice of the community.... there are layers of tradition, varied voices, in the gospels.

Take time to review each Gospel. Their similarities and differences. Matthew, Mark and Luke are "synoptic" meaning similar view. Note the different "inaugural addresses" given by Jesus as chosen by the Gospel writer and how those claimed opening public words of Jesus cue the reader/listener for themes important to that Gospel. Note that John, "The Fourth Gospel" is much different in language about and attributed to Jesus.

The Gospel accounts are not strictly factual or historical. They are mostly metaphorical narratives telling us what the Gospel writer wants his audience to know or remember about Jesus in their day and to appeal to an ongoing experience of Jesus.

Note Marc's section: metaphorical narratives and his treatment of the miracle stories. Rather than thinking of them as historical events that happened 2000 years ago think of them as meaningful narratives about the human condition and how Jesus's presence addresses those conditions. Explore this.

## Chapter 9: Reading Paul Again

"Next to Jesus, Paul is the most important individual in the birth of what became Christianity. More of the New Testament documents were written by him than by any other person. And, more than anybody else, he was responsible for the spread of the Jesus movement into the Gentile world."

Note that of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul there is scholarly consensus that only seven were authored by Paul.

In chronological order, the authentic letters of Paul: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans.

There is majority scholarly consensus that the other letters were written in Paul's name after his death (not authentic letters of Paul): Colossians, Ephesians, and II Thessalonians.

There is near unanimous consensus that the "pastoral epistles" were NOT written by Paul: I and II Timothy and Titus.

In addition to the letters, a secondary source for Paul is the book of Acts although the historical accuracy of the accounts in Acts is questionable.

Marc refers to the genuine letters of Paul for most of his study of Paul with an occasional reference to Acts.

Keep in mind the authorship of the letters. Be aware that the letters not written by Paul show a domestication of the radical message of Jesus already underway. These are letters to particular communities with particular issues.

Paul's letters are not a systematic reflection of the importance of Jesus or the Jesus movement. They are thoughts and reflections according to Paul. And then thoughts of others using the name of Paul for their own authority. Not an uncommon practice.

Review Paul's life and Damascus Road experience. Most people's "religious" or "spiritual" experiences are more like what happened on the "Emmaus Road" (Luke's gospel) .... we do not know what we have experienced or can make sense of it until later...or when we have had some kind of "breakthrough" awareness. This comes gradually. The story of Paul's "Damascus Road" experience is more dramatic and decisive and immediate. Explore whether you can relate to a Damascus Road experience... or have had an Emmaus Road experience. Maybe neither....

Review Paul's message: Jesus is Lord, In Christ, Justification by Grace, Christ Crucified.

At the end of this chapter Marc writes: "Christianity is the only major religion whose two most formative figures were executed by established authority. Accident? Plan of God? Or is there in Jesus and Paul a vision and a program, a message and a mission, that should cause systems of domination, ancient and modern, to tremble?"

Reflect on this. How comfortable are we thinking that Christianity might challenge imperial systems, empires, domination systems today?

Reflect on how Jesus and Paul might see the United States as it claims to be a predominantly "Christian country."

## Chapter 10: Reading Revelation Again

"Revelation is widely popular for the wrong reasons," says biblical scholar Raymond Brown, "for a great number of people read it as a guide to how the world will end, assuming that the author was given by Christ detailed knowledge of the future that he communicated in coded symbols."

This is faulty reading of Revelation. And remember, the Bible was not written for us. Even as some of the themes that trouble and puzzle humanity continue. This book must be understood within its context. (Note: the Book of Revelation is placed at the end of our New Testament but it was NOT the last document to be written. Probably written in the mid 90's.)

Note the word "apocalypse," means unveiling or disclosure or revelation and it is a literary genre as well.

Review Marc's summary of the content of the book. Then note the two ways of Reading revelation: The Futurist Interpretation (Hal Lindsey) and The Past-Historical Interpretation. Both are mistaken predictions. But it is important to recognize their difference.

Note Marc's "Larger Themes:" two Lordships, cosmic combat, revelation and Empire, what's wrong with Rome, the indictment of Empire. A tale of two cities. Do these themes speak to us today – not as prediction but as predicament that humanity continues to struggle with.

What do you make of the vision at the end of the book. "It speaks of the reunion of God with humankind, thereby overcoming the exile that began in Eden. There every tear shall be wiped away. The river of life flows through it and the tree of life is in it. There we will see God. " Don't think of this as God's intervention. Rather consider what we



need to do to bring about such a vision. Do you have hope for it? In our lifetime? In any lifetime? Is this vision compelling enough to strive for? And what about the violence in this story. Where do you stand?

## Epilogue

Marcus makes it clear that there is more than one “voice” that speaks in the Bible. The central questions for the speakers/authors concerns “what life is about” and “what life with God” is about. “ To use slightly different language Marc uses elsewhere, what is real and how then shall we live.

Marc suggests there are three core affirmations about a vision of life with God that run throughout the Bible:

“First, there is a deep sense of the reality of the sacred. God is not only real, but knowable.”

“Second, there is a strong conviction that our lives are made ‘whole’ and ‘right’ by living in a conscious relationship with the Mystery... Life with God is not about believing certain teaching about God....it is about becoming conscious of a relationship that already exists.”

“Third...God is a God of justice and compassion. The God of the Bible is full of compassion and passionate about justice. God’s passion for justice flows out of the very character of God.”

For Marc, “these three are at the core of the biblical vision of life with God: a sacred Mystery at the center of life, with whom we are to be in a conscious relationship and who is passionate about the well-being of the whole creation. We are called to participate in the passion of God.”

What do you think of these three as core to our understanding of the Christian message and what it is to be human?

Marcus calls the two great commandments, love the Lord with all your heart soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself as the two great relationships. Reflect on this language, the two great relationships....does it change your thoughts?

Note the way Marc ends this Epilogue and the book: “As the foundation of the Christian tradition, the Bible is the source of our images and stories for speaking of God’s passion. Thus its interpretation shapes our vision of what it means to take the God of the Bible seriously. The Bible is also a sacrament of the same sacred Mystery, a means whereby God speaks to us still today. Through and within the Bible’s many voices, we are called to discern *the voice* that addresses us in our time. And listen: what we hear matters greatly. It makes all the difference.”

What about the challenge of recognizing and discerning the many voices in the Bible? Remember they are human voices trying to speak of the nature and character of God as they understood it. How do you hear “the voice” addressing us in our time?

As a human product we recognize that the Bible is a collection of stories about human life and human experience of God from a particular time and place. How has this understanding changed your perspective on the Bible’s origin, authority and the importance of interpretation?

How has Reading the Bible Again for the First time helped you take the Bible seriously but not literally?



As we try to discern our experiences of the Mystery that is our life, do the stories in the Bible as metaphorical in nature have more power than if they were about static, unrepeatable events of 2000 years ago?

Can the Biblical stories continue to speak to us today, not as prediction but as mirror of human longing for the sacred and yes for a better world? How do they continue to speak to you?



## FEEDBACK

We welcome your feedback. Give us suggestions, comments, what was helpful, what was not, so we can provide better study guides. No suggestion is too small. What other resources would be helpful for you? We appreciate your help. We would also like to know how you used these guides, for individual study or groups?

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